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Kent Barstow and the com-
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KENT BARSTOW
and the Commando Flight

Rutherford Montgomery

THUMBS UP

WAR WINGS

OUT OF THE SUN

JETS AWAY

TOM PITTMAN, USAF

A HORSE FOR CLAUDIA AND DENNIS (*with Nallee Kenoyer*)

HILL RANCH

MOUNTAIN MAN

WAPITI THE ELK

CARCAJOU

BEAVER WATER

KLEPTY

THE CAPTURE OF WEST WIND

SNOWMAN

THE DEFIANT HEART

e Kent Barstow Adventure Series

KENT BARSTOW: SPECIAL AGENT

MISSILE AWAY

MISSION INTRUDER

KENT BARSTOW: SPACE MAN

KENT BARSTOW AND THE COMMANDO FLIGHT

RUTHERFORD MONTGOMERY

KENT BARSTOW

and the Commando Flight

DUELL, SLOAN AND PEARCE

New York

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For

Randy Atkinson

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KENT BARSTOW
and the Commando Flight

1. ASSIGNMENT

Kent Barstow, Major, USAF, laid Spud Murphy's letter aside and poured himself another cup of coffee. Spud was the best friend he had in the Air Force. They had seen plenty of action together. It was Spud's craving for action that had gotten him his present assignment. The letter came from Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii. In part the letter read:

"Be heading East. We think Saigon. Be chasing the Viet Cong Commies through a stinking jungle. Wish you were here."

Kent's smile faded to a frown as he picked up the envelope and stared at the back flap. The letter had certainly been steamed open and resealed. There was a small smear of mucilage near the tip of the flap. Kent didn't need a lab test to tell him what had happened to that envelope, or why it had been opened. Spud's mission certainly would be classified, and his destination a secret. It was also certain that there were people who would like to know all they could discover about the mission.

Kent looked out through an open window upon a peaceful Washington, D.C., lawn neatly trimmed with shrubbery. A small breeze stirred the leaves on a lilac bush, the trill of

a hermit thrush floated through the window. It was a scene of peace with no threat of danger, but Kent knew that four thousand miles to the east a group of Air Force men were getting ready to plunge into a desperate undertaking. There was trouble ahead for them, and Kent's business was trouble.

For several weeks everything had been quiet for him, just loafing and a little office routine. He knew it couldn't last; it never did. Colonel Jefferys, head of Air Force Intelligence, and his staff were worried. They were constantly sniffing and listening all over the world, and, at the moment, their attention was focused upon the Far East. Peace was something ordinary people took for granted. A few were aware that a constant war was being waged by thousands of men and women working busily to upset governments and to steal vital secrets. But that war wasn't waged in the open—except in spots like Viet Nam above Saigon in southern Asia. There free people were struggling to stay free. It was a struggle waged with bullets and jungle knives instead of ballots. For the Air Force, it was guerrilla air war in the swamps, rice paddies, and heavily matted mountains and valleys of South Viet Nam.

Someone in Hawaii wanted to know about Major Murphy's mission—what it was about and where it was going. The rescaled letter meant that there was a foreign agent at Hickam Air Force Base who had access to the mail room. A lot of little things fitted together in Kent's mind and formed a pattern, out of which he was able to grasp a clear picture. Kent turned the envelope over. His fingerprints were on it as well as the prints of many other fingers, but

he was sure the prints of the foreign agent were not there. He slipped the letter back into the envelope and put it into his jacket pocket. It would interest Colonel Jefferys. It would become a part of the Hickam file, a bit of information which would help Intelligence uncover a nest of spies. The problem was to find those agents before they had a chance to use any information they had gathered.

Kent got to his feet and picked up his cup and saucer. He put them in the little sink next to the hotplate. He rinsed them carefully before buttoning his jacket and getting his cap from a shelf in the closet. His job wasn't to run down small clues, but he never passed up any bit of information which might be used. His job was to follow a trail after it had been established, to close in on the troublemakers. He liked it that way because there was action and danger in hunting down men who struck back viciously, ruthlessly destroying anyone who stood in their way. They seldom surrendered without a fight. They knew that they were expendable, that failure would not be tolerated by their masters. They were the unseen enemy.

And they wanted to know what Spud Murphy was doing and where he was going. The next step would be to learn when he was going and how. The opened letter meant that there was a foreign agent or bribed worker operating in the mail room or in a position where he or she had access to the mail.

When he joined Intelligence, Kent was just another USAF officer, a skilled pilot, able to fly anything the Air Force used, from an old DC-3 to the F-105 Thunderchief

or the HB-193 and H-21 helicopter. He had the equivalent of a graduate engineer's training and rated the right to be classed as a four-headed monster—a man who could serve as pilot, bombardier, navigator, or observer on a B-47. Now, after many missions in far corners of the world, he was known and feared by a host of foreign agents. His jobs became increasingly hazardous because he was a marked man, a dangerous opponent, one to be eliminated if possible.

Kent drove his red convertible sports car to the Pentagon. One of the minor things he did not like about his job was having to leave the red convertible behind when he went on a mission. He had a feeling he wasn't going to make many more trips into the countryside around Washington. He was preoccupied as he drove across the long drawbridge on the road leading to the Pentagon. It was just a hunch, but with him hunches were important. Several times a hunch, a sixth-sense warning of danger, had saved his life.

Pulling into the huge parking lot which flanked the massive building which housed military headquarters, Kent located a vacant space. Even so, he had to walk a half mile to reach the nearest entrance. A staff car would have come for him and dropped him at the doorway nearest to Air Force headquarters, and he wouldn't have had a parking problem; but he preferred to drive his own car. He didn't have much opportunity to use it.

Kent climbed a ramp and entered Air Force headquarters. Colonel Jefferys' office was small, but it was attached to a large department. Tech Sergeant Bender held forth behind a small desk in an anteroom. He greeted Kent with

a big smile. There was little formal rank-pulling in Air Force Intelligence. Bender didn't jump to his feet and snap to attention. He just leaned back and greeted Kent.

"Morning, Major. Looking for a job?"

"Morning, Sergeant. Just delivering a clue." He smiled back at Bender. "Colonel in?"

Bender nodded toward a closed door.

"In a good mood?"

"No," Bender answered, his grin widening.

Kent nodded. That meant Jefferys was in his usual mood. Kent moved toward the door. He didn't need to have Bender announce him. Anyone who visited Jefferys had a good reason for taking up the Colonel's time, otherwise he stayed away. The Colonel was the nerve center of Intelligence groups scattered over the world. He had no time to waste on casual visits. Kent rapped on the door. A gruff voice answered from inside.

"Come in."

Kent opened the door and entered the office. Colonel Jefferys sat behind a big desk which was littered with papers and charts. Back of the desk, the wall was covered by a big map of the world. Close to the Colonel's elbow were two phones with a tobacco humidor between them. Two well-blackened pipes lay in an ashtray.

The Colonel was a gray-haired veteran with a ruggedly chiseled face and a jutting chin. He was a close-mouthed man whose habitual attitude was suspicion. He suspected everything and everyone except those who worked closely

with him. If he suspected any of his men, he got rid of them. He nodded toward a chair beside his desk.

"Morning, Colonel," Kent said, omitting the "Good."

"Morning, Barstow. What brings you here?" Cold, gray eyes stared at Kent.

Kent sat down and fished the letter from his pocket. He dropped it, address side down, on the desk before the Colonel, meeting Jefferys' level stare.

"I think we have a snooper in the mailing department at Hickam," he said.

The Colonel picked up the envelope and looked closely at the flap. His habitual frown changed to a scowl.

"The letter is from Spud Murphy," Kent explained.

Jefferys slid the letter from the envelope. He read it, then returned it to the envelope, which he placed in a tray. He leaned back, his gray eyes regarding Kent sharply. There was a frosty glint in them.

"Murphy knows better than to put such information into a letter," he said harshly. Kent was sure Spud would hear from Jefferys, and that the message would probably singe the paper it was written on.

"Spud is a trusting soul," Kent answered. "He trusts the U.S. mail and its employees."

The Colonel took a pipe from the ashtray. He hesitated for a moment as though giving some thought to his selection. Then he reached for the humidior. His action was deliberate and unhurried.

"I planned to call you this afternoon," he said. "We have a smooth operation working against us out there, a

well-organized group. We have known about the snooper for a week, but the boys haven't been able to catch him—or her.”

“Must be smooth.”

The Colonel nodded and began filling his pipe. When he had it tamped and lighted, he said: “Murphy is with a very important group. They are flying out to Saigon. Eighty experts in guerrilla jungle air warfare. They will fly on a contract carrier chartered by the Military Air Transport Service. That suggest anything to you?”

Kent nodded. “Be a prize if they could kidnap it, say between Guam and Clark Air Base on the Philippines, or shoot it down from a fishing boat. They're non-combat men on a training mission, but that wouldn't matter.”

The Colonel's scowl deepened. “MATS should be flying those men out there in a Hercules. Too many chances of a leak with a contract carrier.” This was a sore spot with the Colonel. He had fought bitterly to keep commercial planes from flying valuable personnel into danger spots, but pressure from the airlines had been strong, and there just weren't enough military transport planes to handle all military missions. More money for modern MATS aircraft had been turned down, which made the Colonel unhappy.

“The contract carrier won't know when they are leaving Travis in California or when they will leave Hickam,” Kent pointed out.

“Advance flight plans have to be worked out. Quite a few people will know at least a few days in advance.” The Colonel inspected the gray ashes in his pipe bowl. His

expression indicated that he didn't like either the pipe or the tobacco.

"So?" Kent let the word hang. No use trying to push the Colonel.

Jefferys dropped his pipe into the ashtray. "You're going over there to uncover this cell. It's your job to see that the transport reaches Saigon."

"Can't Clark Air Base furnish fighter escort? I may be able to uncover this gang in Hawaii, but to cover a six-thousand-mile flight is something else." Kent spoke grimly. It wasn't unusual for Jefferys to ask the impossible, but this was going too far.

"You'll cover it," Jefferys said grimly. "An escort is out. I've asked for it. I don't have enough definite evidence to support the request. Fighter escorts cost money."

"And we're on an economy binge at the moment," Kent said sourly. "If I had my way I'd get a MATS C-135B jet and ask PACAF for a jet fighter escort."

"Get the necessary evidence at Hickam and I'll get the fighter cover." The Colonel ran long fingers through his gray hair. "Break up the gang and we may not need cover."

"A C-121 Super would be only a fair prize, but those eighty men would be a big haul. I'll settle for kidnapping. Shoot them down with a surface-to-air missile and most of them would be rescued. Besides they wouldn't be able to question our experts." Kent was doing his thinking out loud.

"An operation like hijacking calls for considerable in-

filtration. Shooting down the C-121 requires less data. Takeoff time, route, airspeed—in fact, just the flight plan is all they would need—and that could be transmitted to agents along the route.”

“I agree in part,” Kent said. “If it were a MATS ship, I’d agree completely. Every man would be known to us. They couldn’t bribe the crew. But there’ll be a civilian crew whose backgrounds probably haven’t been very carefully checked out.”

The Colonel nodded agreement. “At the moment the Commies have quite a few well-equipped fishing boats on prowl in the Pacific. They’re out there observing our nuclear testing. One or more of them could slip away and be in our route.” Kent was aware that Jefferys was worried badly. He seldom made such long and detailed speeches.

“When do I leave?” Kent asked.

“At one o’clock this afternoon. You’ll fly commercial jet direct to Hickam. You are cleared and the transportation will be set up. I’ll call Major Dunn at Hickam and alert him.”

Kent knew the routine. He got to his feet. The Colonel did not get out of his chair. Kent Barstow knew what his job called for. Jefferys expected him to carry it through.

“I’m on my way, sir,” Kent said.

“Good hunting. Keep me informed at all times, and remember you are not entirely on your own. Any policy matters have to be cleared through me.”

"Yes, sir." Kent turned and left the office. Sergeant Bender grinned at him as he passed the small desk.

"Walked right into something?"

"I sure did." Kent returned Bender's grin.

He left the Pentagon and started across the parking lot. At once a wary feeling took hold of him as it always did when he started on a mission. He was aware that the tentacles of the saboteur world penetrated deep and far. Even the Pentagon parking lot was not beyond their reach. Once before there had been a leak right in Jefferys' department which had almost cost him his life before he even got close to his objective.

He told himself that it was foolish for him to be apprehensive about walking across the Pentagon parking lot. He hadn't even known he was leaving or where he was going up until a few minutes ago. But Jefferys' department had been planning for several days. He remembered the bitter sergeant, brooding because he felt he was getting a dirty deal from Jefferys. That boy had sold information about a mission.

He passed a car with a girl seated in it. She was wearing a pert red hat. She smiled at Kent the way other girls had smiled at the tall young officer. Kent smiled back. Later he passed two civilians sitting in the back seat of a sedan. The back window was rolled down. Kent could hear their voices. The two men paid no attention to him.

As he approached his convertible a Negro got out of the car next to his. He hurried away carrying a canvas bag. He glanced back as he ducked around a big Cadillac. Kent

stopped beside his car. The top was down. He looked into the car, his eyes seeking the instrument board and wiring visible below the dash. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed. He moved to the hood and lifted it, feeling foolish as he peered inside. He was an expert at this sort of thing. He knew exactly what he was looking for, an extra wire that didn't belong there, accumulated grease streaked by being touched. There was no bomb connected to the ignition. He lowered the hood, and snapped it shut, murmuring to himself sheepishly, "There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots."

Getting into the car he drove away. From now on he would be wary and watchful until that C-121 Super Constellation set its wheels down on the Saigon airstrip. He was now the hunted as well as the hunter.

2. KAUAI HIDEOUT

The island of Kauai lies one hundred and two miles east of Honolulu, forty minutes' flight time for a light plane such as a Cessna or Piper. The name means "garden isle" and comes from the island's profusion of tropical foliage. It is the legendary home of Hawaii's "little people," the Menehunes, who were believed to have accomplished amazing feats of construction. None of it remains except Menehune Fish Pond, which skeptics insist is a work of nature. The island is rugged, but there are roads, one of which makes Waimea Canyon accessible. The canyon is a shimmering attraction of rainbow colors. It attracts many visitors, but most of them view it from look-out points.

Kauai is inhabited by easygoing, pleasant people. It is not overrun by tourists like Oahu where Honolulu attracts hordes of visitors from the mainland. Not many resorts have been built. Thus Kauai offered a good location for the headquarters of "Operation Red Flag."

None of the natives were aware that the headquarters existed. They were accustomed to strangers coming and going, staying for months, enjoying the soft air and the cool ocean breeze. Speedboats and light planes were com-

mon means of transportation between the scattered islands of Hawaii. The tour planes they knew, but there were many others.

Headquarters was a big house in Waimea Canyon not easily reached. For a long time it had been vacant except for a half dozen mongooses; then one day a squat thick-set man giving the name of Ming Kong leased it. It was unfurnished, so Ming Kong had to ship in furniture from Honolulu. The boat that delivered the furniture did stop at Honolulu and take on some furniture, but many of the crates did not come from the big city.

Ming Kong didn't want even mongooses poking around his house. He poisoned them, but there was always a fresh supply of the little brown animals anxious to move out of the jungle and replace the ones that died. The mongoose is not native to Hawaii; it was imported from India to combat the hordes of rats which had invaded the islands.

Ming Kong had help in furnishing his house. He had John Kuhio, a little man of Chinese origin, and Kanobi, a burly man of uncertain origin. He also had Frank Nago, who could easily pass as a prosperous merchant. Occasionally he was visited by a Hawaiian girl named Tasa Moto who was a clerk at Hickam. Tasa was small and pretty. At work she wore a prim print dress, silk stockings and sandals. At headquarters she went barefoot and wore a pink mumu.

The group of people who used the big house on Kauai were the brains of the operation. Ming Kong was its head man. That meant only that he carried out orders that he

received over the short-wave receiver set up in an upstairs bedroom. Meetings were held in what had once served as a dining room.

Ming Kong called a meeting for a Saturday evening. That would allow Tasa to fly over with Frank Nago. She had established a habit of going away for weekends, telling her roommates at Hickam that she had friends on the big island, Hawaii. None of the girls questioned this, as Tasa was a demurely attractive girl with big dark eyes which opened wide when she was excited. Men liked her and she often had dates.

The dining room had been fitted out with a big table around which stood straight-backed kitchen chairs. Frank Nago would have preferred a softer chair but the others did not mind. They all sat around the table waiting for Ming Kong to outline the project they were to carry out. So far all that had been done was to gather information. But now Kong indicated that he was ready to act. He folded thick arms over his chest.

"Two plans have been worked out. I need not go into detail now." Ming Kong unfolded his arms, reached out, and took an apple from a basket of fruit. He bit into it and crunched loudly. Frank Nago shuddered in disgust. Ming Kong shook the apple at Nago, then took another bite.

"Swine," Frank Nago said under his breath.

Juice squirted from the apple. Tasa, who was seated beside Kong, lifted a hand to wipe a drop from her cheek. She was amused because the fastidious Frank was upset.

"We have a problem which must be handled at once.

A special agent is on his way from Washington. This I have learned today. He will pose a real threat to our operation. He is the best field man they have." He turned the apple around and took another bite.

"Who is this smart one?" Kanobi asked.

"His name is Barstow. I have heard much about him. You will take a good look at the picture I show you so that you will know him when you see him." He leaned over and reached into a briefcase propped against his chair. Pulling out an eight-by-ten-inch photo he handed it to Tasa. "Pass it around."

"My, he is the handsome one," Tasa said. She sighed. "Too bad that he is the one." She passed the photo to John Kuhio.

Kuhio studied it, then passed it to Kanobi. It went around the table with no further comments. Kong was now down to the core of the apple. He shoved it into his mouth and chewed on it. After he had swallowed, he said:

"We will set a trap. This man must be disposed of quickly."

"This man Barstow will not be working alone," Kuhio said. "Major Dunn has men. This Barstow will work with Dunn."

"I have a complete report on him. He is not a man who depends on numbers. He has many times worked alone." Kong turned to Tasa. "You will bring him to us."

"He may not go for a fast pickup." Tasa shrugged her shoulders. "You want this done quickly."

"This will not be anything of that sort. Your work at the

base is finished. You will make him suspicious of you and he will trail you, hoping to locate this place." Kong smiled. "He will want bigger game than you, little one. He will want me."

Frank Nago laughed. "He will trail a plane to Kauai?"

"Certainly," Kong snapped.

Kuhio spoke for the first time. "And when he has eliminated all the other islands and knows we are on Kauai, Major Dunn and his men comb the island."

Kong spoke to Tasa. "I will give you and Frank careful instructions as to how this will be done. My information on Barstow leads me to believe he will land and try to trail the pair of you to our hideout. I agree with Kuhio that he will plan to call the base and get help after he has our place located."

Kanobi grinned. "You can leave the jeep at the lower bend of the road and take the jungle path on foot. I will give this Barstow a lesson in jungle ambush." He rubbed his hands together eagerly. "Have an errand to do before you leave the landing strip. Give him time to hire a car to follow."

"Your plan is sound, except for one thing. I want to question Barstow before we dispose of him." Kong's lips pulled into a hard line.

"You think you can make this man talk, a veteran in this game?" Nago asked sarcastically.

"I have never failed to make a man talk," Kong answered, and the look on his face was convincing. "Kanobi

and Kuhio will overpower him on the jungle trail and bring him here."

"I think there are a lot of ifs in this plan. I don't like it," Nago said.

"If anything goes wrong we burn this place and go by boat to Oahu. The place in the hills above Honolulu will be safe for a few weeks. By that time we will be able to scatter." Kong looked around the circle of faces.

The others knew there would be no further argument. The men got to their feet and left Tasa with Kong. He sat looking at her for a few minutes before he spoke.

"You have done well with the man Grant, but how about Miller?" Kong fixed the girl with a steady gaze.

"Tom has a grudge at the world. He was washed out as a pilot. He hates being just a flight attendant on a civilian transport plane."

"They clearly understand that they get their money after we arrive in North Viet Nam?"

"Yes."

"They know that if they change their minds and the transport does not change course approaching Clark—they know what will happen?"

"They know it will be blown up."

"Good. Now I will explain in detail what you are to do regarding Barstow." Kong moved his chair closer to Tasa.

3. A LEAD

Kent Barstow heaved a sigh of relief as the Boeing 707 swept around the shoreline of the island of Molokai for the short run into Honolulu International. He was impatient and restless. He hadn't been able to shake off the feeling that there wasn't much time in which to clean up the trouble at Hickam. A feeling of urgency gripped him. He glanced at his watch. They would be landing at 11:07 A.M.—plenty of time to get briefed that afternoon and have a look around.

Diamond Head loomed in the distance beyond the tall buildings of Honolulu. Kent could see the curving stretch of Waikiki Beach. There would be no time to enjoy the luxury of that fabulous stretch of sand or to ride a surfboard. No time to dine and dance at the Kaneohe Rice Bowl or the Ginbasha. If he had time he'd probably find old friends at either place.

The 707 touched down smoothly and began its taxi run into the terminal. The passengers stiffened eagerly. There was the feeling of "aloha" in the air, eager anticipation of the leis of orchids and carnations, the welcoming kiss that went with them. Hawaii, one of the United States of America, but what a different state! Divided from the main-

land by a state line that was marked by several thousand miles of blue water.

The Boeing came to a stop and the passengers started pushing into the aisle. Kent curbed an urge to shove his way to the exit. He moved along slowly, following an elderly couple on their second honeymoon. Behind him two girls giggled excitedly. There was a hum of happy talk. Kent reached the off ramp. A pretty stewardess smiled at him.

"'Bye, now," she said.

"'Bye," Kent murmured and smiled back at her.

At the gate, he spotted the square shoulders of Major Dunn. Back of the Major stood an airman. The Major's broad face broke into a smile as he saw Kent.

"Aloha," he called as he stepped aside to allow a slim dark attendant to move toward Kent. She carried leis over her arm, and lifted one as he bent his head. As it dropped around his neck, she kissed his cheek.

"Aloha," she greeted him.

The thought struck Kent that this was a nice way for a special agent bent on grim business to be greeted. He grinned at the girl and returned her aloha, then extended a hand to Major Dunn.

"You sure look good to me," the Major said.

"Glad to be back again."

"Give Tommy your baggage checks. He'll collect your bags." The Major's smile had vanished and he looked grim.

"We have to move fast on this, Kent."

Kent nodded. "So I gathered from Jefferys."

"I have my car. Tommy has a staff car. He'll drop your stuff at the BOQ. I've already signed you in."

They hurried along the extensive ramp and through the main lobby. Honolulu International was new and a splendid terminal, the finest Kent decided, that he had seen in the United States. They went across to the parking lot and got into the Major's car. The Major headed out upon the highway and swung toward Pearl Harbor and Hickam AFB. They turned off the highway at Entrance Boulevard and later into Hangar Avenue which took them to PACAF Headquarters, the headquarters for the Pacific Air Forces.

Kent glanced at a scarred wall. The bullet and strafing scars had been left as a memorial and remembrance of World War Two when the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and Hickam. Major Dunn led Kent straight to his office.

"We can have a few minutes before lunch," he said as he motioned Kent to a chair.

Kent sat down and waited. He had worked with Major Dunn before. The Major was a good man on detail, but he lacked imagination and he had a staff of youngsters who had had little experience; all but two were recently out of Intelligence School in Texas.

"Jefferys is putting the pressure on," Dunn began. "We just don't have much to go on. Leak in the mail room, couple of inquisitive visitors. But Jefferys' boys had uncovered some evidence that the Commies plan to sabotage a technical-aid mission."

"The mail-room leak might give us a lead to the top operators," Kent said.

Dunn nodded. "So far we haven't found one good suspect. The girls who serve as clerks and stenographers all live together in a boarding house. They have a car pool. We've checked their steady boyfriends, kept an eye on them. Our airmen all check out clean."

"Even so that's where I'll start."

"Another tough angle is that MATS plans to go right ahead on schedule with that flight." Dunn leaned forward and lowered his voice. "We have just forty-eight hours."

Kent smiled at the Major's caution. "Think this office is bugged?" he asked.

"I don't know what to think. Someone is operating right here on the base."

"How long have you known the flight schedule?"

"Got it an hour ago," Dunn said grimly.

"Crew been briefed yet?"

"No. General Kelly and his staff and myself are all who know."

"Good. Let's keep it that way."

"Can't sit on it much longer. Transport Operations has to make up a schedule on it and that pretty much shoves it into the open. They'll be making flight plans of a C-121 flight, anybody could guess," Dunn said gloomily.

"And make notes."

"Right." Dunn got to his feet. "I did tell one man you were arriving. He's a pal of yours and asked to have lunch

with us." Dunn smiled. "He has worked a lot with you so I figured he was safe."

"Spud Murphy?" Kent asked eagerly.

"Spud. That nut. Shifting over to this mission so he could get in the middle of a hot jungle war." Dunn shook his head.

"That's Spud. Always sticking his neck out." Kent grinned.

"He ought to be along any minute."

As though this was a signal for an entrance, a big officer with his cap cocked at a rakish angle barged in. His jacket carried the insignia of a major along with pilot's wings and a number of ribbons indicating he had seen plenty of action. Spud Murphy charged forward, his hand extended.

"Kent, you old sinner."

They gripped hands. Kent laughed. "So you're going to show the South Vietnamese Air Force lads how to fly a chopper."

Spud slapped his pal on the back. "Chopper, B-26, T-28, AD-6—whatever old-hat stuff we've given them." Spud grinned broadly. "I'll be blasting Viet Cong Commies while you're sniffing a cold trail."

Kent sobered as he thought about Spud going out on that transport which the enemy intended should never reach Viet Nam. But he did not say anything. Spud went on impatiently.

"I'm a starved monkey. Let's eat."

"Good idea," Dunn agreed. He took his cap off a rack. Kent was hatless and wore a civilian suit. He walked

between Spud and the Major down a long hall toward an exit. They went out and got into the Major's car. He drove them to a dining room at the MATS terminal on the base.

When they were seated and a waitress had taken their orders, Spud leaned back. "What brings you out here?" he asked.

Kent smiled. "Your last letter."

"You mean you fell for that line: 'Wish you were here'?"

"Somebody had steamed it open and read it," Kent said soberly.

"Snoopy folks in the mail room." Spud grinned.

"Wait till you hear from Jefferys," Kent answered.

"That old grouch. Glad I'm out from under his thumb." Spud made a wry face, then laughed. "Glad I'm where he can't put the screws on."

"Just the same there shouldn't be any loose talk about this mission," Kent said.

Spud sobered at once. "There's been no loose talk," he said shortly. "But we have air control over there; so what can they do about it?"

"That's what I'm supposed to find out, with Dunn's help," Kent answered grimly.

Spud frowned at the plate of spareribs that the waitress set before him. "Jefferys worries like an old woman. Most suspicious man in the Air Force."

"That's his job," Major Dunn said with a trace of irritation.

The talk drifted to the past when Spud and Kent had

worked together. Lunch was eaten quickly. Kent was anxious to go over Dunn's reports and to have a look at the mail room, but first he had some arrangements to make. They parted with Spud outside the headquarters building.

"See you after Saigon," Spud said cheerfully as they shook hands.

"Keep your neck in," Kent advised. He stood smiling as he watched Spud stride away. Even in his walk, Spud had a cocky way with him. He turned to the Major. "Quite a guy, but he can be real tough. Rather have him with me in a fight than any man I know."

"The Viet Congs will know he's around," Dunn agreed.

"Our birds may not roost on Oahu. There are seven other sizable islands in this group. Do you have a light plane that could be made available to me?"

"We have a couple of Pipers, China Bees which belong to the Hickam Aero Club. I'll reserve one for you. And you'll have a car to use," Dunn said.

"Good. Now for your reports."

Kent spent the next two hours going over the reports Dunn's men had made. He found nothing promising in them. Jefferys had collected far more pertinent information. Kent had a list of foreign agents who might possibly be operating in the Pacific area with good descriptions of some of the more prominent ones, also some information on how they worked. On the flight over, Kent had studied this information carefully. He put the reports away and headed out to check on the car he was to use, and to locate the Piper.

He found the Piper parked near the Hawaiian Air National Guard interceptor base. The 326th Air Division was responsible for air defense of Hawaii. It is the only National Air Guard unit to be integrated into the regular Air Force on a full-time basis. Kent was aware that the 326th had made an enviable record. Four F-101's stood ready to go. Kent looked the Piper over carefully, grinned as he compared it to the deadly F-102's. Then he drove back to headquarters area and sought out the mail room.

4. DECOY

The mailing department was more extensive than Kent had expected. He poked around, being careful not to seem snoop, and finally located tables where airmen and girls were sorting letters. He kept well back and felt quite sure no one noticed him. The three girls were small and dark natives of Hawaii's mixed races. Their brown hands moved swiftly. The airmen looked like airmen should. They worked as fast as the girls. Once in a while there was a scrap of conversation. One of the girls spoke to the girl next to her.

"Did'j see the picture running at the Kuhio?"

"That 'Whatever Happened to Baby Jane' thing?" her neighbor asked.

"That Baby Jane was just horrible."

"Not as bad as her sister. Why's Crawford want to be that person?"

"Same goes for Bette Davis."

Kent smiled. Hardly spy material. Then he took a closer look at the hand of the girl who had spoken first as it slid down to the pocket of her dress. There was a letter in the hand. It dropped into the pocket. With smooth motions the girl went on sorting letters. Kent eased around a cor-

ner. He didn't want the girl to spot him. But he meant to watch her every movement.

Presently the girl left the table and crossed the room. Kent eased himself back. He bent over a fountain and was drinking when the girl passed him in the corridor. She walked down to the women's rest room and entered. Kent realized grimly that this was out of bounds for him. He moved around a corner and waited. After a while the girl came out of the rest room. As she stepped out she tucked a lipstick into her pocket. She moved along briskly on her flat-heeled slippers, paying no attention to Kent as he sauntered along ahead of her. She spoke pleasantly and smiled at several airmen who passed her. She entered the mail room.

Kent paused to consider his next step. The girl's dress pocket had bulged a little. Possibly she carried a little camera with which to microfilm letters. One thing was certain, he wasn't going to alarm her. He looked at his watch. The time was fifteen minutes after four o'clock. The girl would be going off duty soon and he could tail her.

To make sure, he checked with Major Dunn's office to get the time the girl would leave and by what exit. Dunn's secretary got him the information at once. The sergeant had been on a detail which checked the movements of the mail-room personnel. He even named the girl when Kent described her. She was Tasa Moto and she roomed with three other girls.

"I tailed them to their boarding house several times," he said. "Missed my dinner waiting for them to come out.

Every darn one of them had a date. They scattered like quail." The sergeant chuckled. "There was only one of me. I picked one and got something to eat when they went to a cafe in town."

Kent thanked the sergeant. At any rate, he knew which one to follow when the girls came out of the boarding house. He located his car and moved it around to the parking area near the exit Tasa Moto would use. He had a wait of fifteen minutes before the four mail-room girls appeared. They got into a battered Ford and drove away. Kent followed, keeping well back.

Roads and streets on Oahu are not well marked. But this did not bother Kent. It was impossible to get lost on the island. The girls lived on a short street off the highway. The boarding house was a two-story building and certainly was low-cost housing, though Kent knew that did not mean cheap. Kent turned off on a side street and made a U-turn. He parked and waited. He was two blocks from the boarding house but he could see the front porch.

One of the girls had remained in the car. Kent thought it was Tasa Moto but he could not be sure. She sat for some time before starting the car and turning around in the street. When she passed the side street where Kent was parked she was driving about thirty miles per hour, a normal pace for placid Hawaii. The driver was Tasa Moto. Kent let her get well ahead before following.

The Ford headed back toward Hickam but turned off on the road leading to Honolulu International Airport. She drove to the terminal used by Aloha and Hawaiian

Airlines, some distance from the new airport. Kent pulled up at the end of the loading zone and waited. He watched Tasa park her car and cross to the waiting room of Hawaiian Airlines, where she entered. Kent left his car at the curb and sauntered to the entrance. He was in time to see the girl leave by a side door.

Kent followed her to the door but did not step through it. It was open and he could see a walk leading out to a flight strip where private planes were parked. The girl approached a small Cessna and stood looking up at it. A head appeared above her, then a door opened and a man climbed down to stand beside the girl. He was a dark, rather dapper man of perhaps thirty years of age. They talked a little, apparently arguing, then the girl turned and started back along the path. The man called after her.

"We're taking off in thirty minutes."

The girl stopped and called back. "I'll be back in thirty minutes, but don't you dare leave me."

Kent turned and headed for the exit fast. He aimed to be up in the Piper looking for the Cessna when it took off. He wanted to know where it was going. It appeared that he had struck a hot trail. He climbed into his car and drove away fast. As he drove back to Hickam, he considered alerting Dunn and decided that was the smart thing to do. It would only take a few minutes. He could call from the nearest warehouse.

Finding a handy phone proved easy, but when he got Dunn's office he found only a corporal on duty.

"Major Dunn left an hour ago. He will be contacting me within an hour, sir. He left the base."

"This is Major Barstow. Tell Major Dunn I'm tailing a Cessna plane. I do not know where it is headed. I'll contact him if anything develops."

"Yes, sir," the corporal answered.

Kent frowned. If he waited, the Cessna would get away. He hurried out to his car and parked close to the Piper.

As he climbed aboard, a man in fatigues called to him, "You got clearance, Mister?"

"Will have in a couple of minutes," Kent called back.

Seating himself at the controls, Kent picked up the ship's phone and asked for Operations Tower. A voice answered at once.

"This is Code K," Kent said. He knew that would get him immediate attention.

"Yes, sir."

"I want immediate clearance for Piper F-3624."

"Runway Six. You may proceed at once."

"Thank you." Kent already had the engine turning over. It burst into life and he let it roar to warm up. Glancing at his watch he saw that he had less than five minutes to get into the air and circle around the Honolulu field.

The Piper responded nicely. It taxied smoothly to the designated strip which was used by the base's light planes. Jets and cargo transport aircraft of MATS used the runways of International. Kent revved up the motor and eased off the brakes. The Piper skimmed down the runway and

eased off and up. There was no roaring rush of power, but the Apache lifted quickly. Kent wanted altitude so that he could observe the Cessna. It wasn't necessary to be close to the plane. Once it headed out, its direction would pretty well indicate which island it was headed for.

Below him lay the runways of Honolulu International, Hickam Field, Pearl Harbor, and to the east Waikiki Beach and Diamond Head. An Aloha Airlines Friendship F-27 came in for a landing. Then he spotted the Cessna moving out on the flight line. It turned slowly and hesitated, then headed down the long stretch of hardtop. Kent banked and made a sweeping turn as the Cessna took to the air.

The plane below lifted to about eight hundred feet and headed east across the tip of Oahu, skirting a rugged mountain. Kent kept his altitude which was just under two thousand feet. He continued to circle as though out for a pleasure flight. The Cessna continued east, flying over blue water. It seemed certain that the pilot was heading toward Kauai or Niihau, a small island south of Kauai. The distance to the larger island was one hundred miles and Kent felt sure the Cessna could not lose him. He leveled off and headed east, sloping down a little.

For an airliner the flight would take about thirty-five minutes. But the Cessna would probably take forty-five or more minutes. The Apache's engine was purring smoothly. Kent paced himself to match the speed of the Cessna which seemed to be in no hurry. After flying fifty miles Kent got on the radio and contacted Hickam.

"Code K calling Hickam Tower."

After a second call, a voice came in. "Hickam Tower. Code K, come in."

"Code K to Intelligence. Do you read me?"

"Code K, we read you clear."

"Cessna heading toward Kauai. Will call back if landing seems advised. Over and out."

The Piper buzzed on and soon Kent saw the Cessna heading in for a landing on Kauai flight strip. He eased the Piper lower and circled as he neared the island. He watched the Cessna taxi in and park. A man and a woman got out and walked off the apron. Kent saw several parked cars and jeeps. The couple stopped at a jeep and got in, and headed toward the wooded mountains bordering Wai-mea Canyon. There was only one road leading to the canyon from that side. It was narrow and winding with dense jungle on each side. Kent circled looking for buildings but saw none. If there was a house or other building it was hidden by the dense jungle. But he had the location pretty well pinpointed. The canyon was so rugged it did not seem likely there would be a house very far into it.

Now he had to consider his next move. He had no real proof that the couple were meeting foreign agents or that they were meeting anyone. All he had was the girl's act of slipping a letter out of the mail she was sorting. He watched the jeep as it penetrated deeper into the jungle. At a sharp bend in the road where it turned and started to spiral upward toward the rim above the canyon, the jeep pulled off the road and parked. The man and the

girl got out and vanished into the dense growth. Kent couldn't see a trail, but he knew there must be one.

He didn't want to fly low over the spot. That might alarm the couple. If this was a nest of saboteurs, he didn't want to alert them. He swung around and headed back toward the landing strip, dropping down to eight-hundred feet altitude. The sun was setting and he had just enough daylight left to get back to Hickam. If he landed, he'd probably stay on the island overnight. He put in a call for Hickam and this time he got Major Dunn, who was waiting to hear from him. The major's voice boomed in his ear.

"Are you still on the trail of that Cessna?"

"They landed here and have driven up a jungle road. The girl Tasa Moto and a man. I didn't spot any buildings, jungle too heavy."

"Want us to fly over and close in?" Dunn asked.

"I'll land and ask a few questions around. This is a small place and somebody must know them. They're not apt to take off in the Cessna tonight. If they try to get away on a boat I'll call you and the Navy can pick them up." As he talked Kent formed his plans.

"We'll be on hand before daybreak," Dunn answered. "This looks like the first real lead we've had."

"I won't stir anything up," Kent promised. "See you in the morning." He flipped the radio off and headed the Piper in for a landing.

Kent parked the Piper at some distance from the Cessna which stood close to two other staked-down light planes. He got out and found an attendant, a young man with a

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shock of black hair. Kent took a five-dollar bill from his pocket.

“Secure the Piper,” he said and handed the young man the five-dollar bill.

“Yes, sir,” the man said.

Kent nodded toward the Cessna. “Know that Cessna?”

“It comes here regular.”

“Know who owns it?”

The young man gave Kent a sharp look. “Sure, a man named Frank Nago.”

“Does he live here?” Kent saw that the young man was beginning to wonder about the questions he was asking.

“Mainlander here for the summer, I guess. There’s four of them.” The young man looked closely at the Piper. Kent was glad it carried no Air Force identification.

“You look after the Cessna?” Kent asked.

“Some. I stake her down when she comes in. Blows a bit here once in a while. Guess he services her over at Honolulu. He a friend of yours?”

“No. I’m just looking around for a place myself. Know any for rent?” Kent smiled broadly.

“Not much for rent in the summer. You could ask in Lihue.” The young man started off. Kent let him go. He walked toward the small airport. He’d need transportation and a place to sleep, if he got the chance.

The airport was deserted except for a cab outside and a few attendants working inside. Kent didn’t question any of them. The cab driver looked at him expectantly. Kent walked over to where the man was seated on a bench.

"Is there a place to get a room near here? I may want to take off early in the morning."

"Only a short run into Lihue. I can bring you here in the morning," the driver answered.

"Give me your number. I have some tinkering to do on my plane. Engine was a bit rough coming over," Kent said.

The driver fished a card from his pocket and handed it to Kent. "Ring me when you're ready."

Kent turned and looked at the airport building. There was a pay phone booth outside the door. He turned back to the driver. "Anyone stay on here all night?"

"Watchman and one man. Only emergency night landings here." The driver got to his feet.

Kent walked away from the building. Offshore the sky was ablaze with fading sunset colors. The man who had staked down the Piper had left. Kent climbed aboard. He sat thinking. If he stayed in the Piper all night he could cover the Cessna; but that did not seem to be a very bright idea. The dock seemed to be the place he should watch. There had to be a docking area. He got out of the plane and headed toward the airport.

Kent entered the airport. He found what he wanted at once. A phone on a counter with a sign over it reading: **DRIVE YOURSELF**. He walked over and picked up the receiver after reading the number to dial. A pleasant voice answered. Yes, **DRIVE YOURSELF** would send out a car at once. Did he have his driver's license with him? Kent said, "Yes."

He sat on a bench outside the airport and waited. The rented car arrived in twenty minutes, accompanied by another car. Kent showed his driver's license and signed for the car.

"Where is the docking area?" he asked.

"Nawiliwili Harbor," the rental man answered. "Turn left when you get to Lihue."

Kent thanked him and walked out to the rented car. He drove slowly along the highway and had no trouble finding the left turn. For once there was a sign, something not always found along the island roads. He drove to Nawiliwili Harbor and parked. Sitting in the car, he looked over the anchored craft. Most of them were fishing boats and small pleasure craft, but there was one boat which looked as though it was rigged for sea going. It was too dark to see the name, so Kent moved the car down the dock and turned his headlights on the boat. The name was "Maalaea Bay," and the lettering looked fresh against the dingy paint on the hull. Kent had a feeling another name had been painted over.

The boat looked like any small tramp freighter. Kent had seen dozens of them. There was no light aboard and no one came on deck. Kent switched off his headlights. The old freighter was the most likely boat for a gang to use. She could cruise back and forth without attracting attention. And she might be equipped with powerful engines for speed. He had an urge to go aboard, though he could think of no reason he could offer for visiting if there was anyone aboard.

The dock was not deserted. There were several lighted buildings, possibly small fish-and-chip places, and people passed. A party of four boarded a trim cruiser and deck lights came on. Laughter floated up to Kent. A big man walked past close to the rented car and paused to stare at Kent. He moved on and entered one of the lighted buildings.

Kent suddenly realized that he was hungry. He decided he would investigate the lighted building and see if he could get some food and a cup of coffee. He got out of the car and walked to the nearest lighted building. A look through a window told him that it was an eating and drinking place. There was a counter and several small tables. Kent entered.

He sat down at one of the small tables. Looking around, he noted that there were three men at the counter drinking beer. A man wearing a stained white apron came from behind the counter. He had a dingy cloth over his arm.

"Fish or drink?" he asked.

"Just fish?"

"Just fish."

"I'll have some fish and a cup of black coffee," Kent said.

The man shuffled away. After a short wait the man returned and set a platter of fried fish and french fried potatoes and a cup of coffee before him.

"Be one dollar."

Kent handed over a one-dollar bill and started to eat. The fish was good and so was the coffee. As he ate, he

watched the three men at the counter. He had a feeling one of them was watching while appearing not to be doing it. Kent's training made him notice such things. The man was big and could be the same man who had paused to stare at him while he was sitting in the car.

5. MAALAEA BAY

The big man who had been covertly watching Kent got off his counter stool and walked across the room to Kent's table. He gave Kent a friendly grin. Kent wasn't able to tell what the man's ancestry was but at least one of his ancestors had been a Hawaiian and the other probably Asiatic.

"Mind if I sit down?" the stranger asked.

"Glad to have you join me." Kent was glad. Here was a local man who might furnish some information.

The man held out a big hand. "I'm Mal Kanobi, master of the Maalaea Bay anchored offshore."

Kent took the big hand. "I'm Kent Barstow. Can I buy you a beer?"

Kanobi sat down and his weight made the chair creak. "Don't mind if I do have another beer. All I got aboard is rum." Kanobi waved a big hand toward the man behind the counter. "Couple of beers," he shouted.

Kent had no intention of drinking with the sea captain, but he did not protest. He had an idea Kanobi could drink both beers. If Mr. Kanobi got mellow he might talk a lot. The counterman brought the two beers, cans with the tops

punched. Kent smiled and shoved his can across the table to the captain.

"I'll have another cup of coffee," he said to the counter-man.

Kanobi raised a bushy eyebrow. "You on the wagon?"

"Guess that's the way you'd put it." Kent continued to smile.

"You a visitor from the mainland?"

"That's right."

"Great place these islands. Kauai is the best, though. Not so many tourists." Kanobi took a deep drink from his can, then wiped his lips with the back of a hairy hand.

"You been here a long time?" Kent asked.

"Sure. Know most everybody on the island. Got a finger in a lot of things." The captain winked at Kent. "Now if you'd have come to me, I'd have saved you some money on that rented car. Got a couple I rent out."

"I'm a stranger here. Next time I'll look you up," Kent said. "I'm planning on coming back, renting a house back near the mountains." Kent laid a dollar bill on the table as the counterman set down his coffee. "Do you know of a house I could rent?"

"Sure. Got one out near the valley. Secluded, so it's hard to rent. Some folks in it for the summer. Take you out and show it to you tonight." Kanobi drained the first can of beer and belched loudly.

"We'll have a look tomorrow," Kent said hastily.

"Fine." Kanobi started working on the second can of beer.

"What sort of folks have it now?" Kent asked.

"Strangers, but they're not mainlanders. Don't mix much with us folks. Queer lot." Kanobi took another deep drink and smacked his lips.

Kent almost suggested that they look at the house as soon as they finished their drinks, but one thing held him back. If there was a head man, he could very well know about Kent Barstow, might even have a picture. He realized that the chances were the people the captain was talking about were not the ones he was looking for. Then he got an idea.

"They fly in and out?" he asked.

"Sure. They got a little plane. One of them Cessnas." Kanobi put a period to the sentence by tipping up the beer can.

Kent felt his pulses quicken. The sea captain was being very helpful. Kanobi lowered the can.

"How about coming aboard the Maalaea Bay? More comfortable aboard. I'll brew up some coffee. I'll lace mine with rum and we'll talk. I don't get much chance to jaw with mainlanders."

"Be glad to," Kent said.

They left the fish-and-chip place and walked along the dock area. Kanobi kept up a running conversation.

"Folks have to eat, they buy cars and iceboxes and stuff. I do all right with the freighter; but between trips I got spare time so I poke into a lot of things."

"You have things for the people in that house?" Kent asked.

"Hauled in their furniture and stuff. Quite a cargo."

Kanobi chuckled. "Offered to lend a hand uncrating, but the boss man sent me packing. Mean feller."

Kanobi halted beside a dinghy tied up at a landing platform. "Here we are. Hop in."

Kent got into the dinghy. Kanobi loosened the boat and stepped in. He shoved off and sat down. Manning the oars he started pulling powerfully. The dinghy spun around and darted away from the platform. The sea captain did not need an outboard motor, he had powerful arm muscles. Kent admired the way he handled the little boat. Within minutes they were alongside the old freighter. Kanobi made the dinghy fast and motioned for Kent to climb aboard.

On deck Kanobi switched on a light. He seemed to have trouble with it. It blinked on and off a couple of times before it stayed on.

"Pesky loose bulb," the captain explained.

"Can happen," Kent agreed.

Kanobi led the way below deck to a large cabin. He switched on lights and Kent looked around. There was a galley, a table with benches on each side, a bank of cupboards with closed doors, and two old overstuffed chairs. They were worn and not very clean, but they looked comfortable. Kanobi nodded toward one of them.

"That'll beat those hard chairs in the fish-and-bean joint."

Kent sank into the chair. It was comfortable. Kanobi busied himself lighting an oil stove and putting on a pot of water. He scooped a liberal amount of coffee into the pot.

"Kona coffee," he explained. "None of that mainland muck for me."

"I'm partial to it myself," Kent agreed. He had always favored coffee from the big island, Hawaii.

Kanobi set out coffee mugs. He opened a cupboard and got out a tin can of sugar.

"Noticed you drink her black but with sugar," he said as he set the cups and the can on the table. He next got out a bottle of rum.

"You like a bit of rum in your coffee?" he asked.

"No, thanks," Kent answered.

"I always add a slug. Keeps me on my toes," Kanobi explained with a broad grin. "Besides nourishing the hair on my chest." He turned to the stove and lifted the coffee-pot lid. He peered into the pot and grunted.

Presently the aroma of fresh coffee filled the cabin. Kanobi had seated himself in the other easy chair. He pulled a black cigar from his shirt pocket and bit off the end. Leaning back he scratched a kitchen match across the sole of one big shoe and applied the flame to the cigar. He puffed deeply and blew out a cloud of smoke which made Kent wrinkle his nose as the fumes swirled around his head. The smell was rank. Kanobi smiled genially.

"Like my cigars and my coffee strong," he said. Taking the cigar from between his lips he sniffed it, then leaned toward Kent. "You wouldn't be thinking of investing a bit of money out here, would you?"

"I'm afraid not," Kent said with a smile. "I move around quite a bit."

"What's your line?" Kanobi asked.

"I sell insurance," Kent said, using the first idea that came into his head.

"That makes you a competitor. I sell some insurance myself." Kanobi beamed on Kent.

"What kind?" Kent asked. He was trying to think of a way to get the talk back to the men who had rented the house near the mountains.

"Fire, auto, not much life." Kanobi laughed. "Folks here don't put much store on their lives." He sniffed and got to his feet. "Coffee smells about right." He pulled the cork from the rum bottle with his teeth, waving his cigar as he did so. Tipping the bottle over one of the mugs, he poured liberally.

As Kent watched, he had a foreboding that the sea captain might get himself drunk. Then he decided that it would take a lot of rum to get the captain tight. Kanobi crossed to the stove. With his back to Kent he poured coffee into the two cups he had carried with him. He returned to the table and set the cups in their saucers. When Kent started to get to his feet Kanobi lifted a hand.

"Sit tight. We drink in comfort." He moved to a corner and got two folding coffee stands. He snapped the legs into place on one and set it before Kent, then set the other up beside the other chair. Turning to the table, he got the coffee cups and set one on each stand. After that he got his bottle and set it beside his cup. He sank into his chair and lifted his cup.

"Bottoms up," he said.

They both lifted their cups and drank. The coffee was really strong, but Kent liked it that way. He sipped the bitter brew, then added some sugar.

"That house in the jungle interests me." Kent took a swallow of coffee. "Is there room enough so that I could have friends visit me?"

Kanobi set his cup down and took a deep puff of his cigar. "Two stories, lots of rooms. Bath upstairs and down. Set up off the ground so the termites haven't got to it. Only pests are a few mongooses."

"I rather like mongooses," Kent said. He lifted his cup and looked at the black liquid in it. The coffee was sure strong.

"Nothing but rats," Kanobi said. "Only they don't come aboard ship."

Kent shook his head after taking another swallow of coffee. He tried to keep his eyes on Kanobi's cigar but the captain kept twitching it back and forth. He suddenly felt sleepy and decided he had better return to his car. He could catch a few winks of sleep there.

"Guess I better shove off," he said as he set his empty cup on the stand.

"No hurry. I'll pour you another cup of coffee," Kanobi got to his feet.

Kent held up a hand. "No more, thanks." He blinked at the captain. Kanobi must be getting drunk, he was swaying unsteadily. Kent braced himself with one hand on the coffee stand. He tried to get up but didn't seem able to rise. He tried to focus on Kanobi but the floor of the cabin

seemed to be tilting upward and the captain was floating away from him. His eyes closed and opened slowly. The mug on the stand seemed to be coming up toward his face. He felt the rim strike his chin and dimly heard a crash as the mug fell to the floor and smashed. His head was filled with a loud humming like the whirr of wings. Then he sank into a deep foggy haze.

Kanobi stood looking down at Kent, who lay relaxed on his back on the floor. He picked up the rum bottle and took a deep drink out of it. Grinning broadly, he walked to a shelf where there was a phone. He dialed deliberately. After a pause he spoke into the phone.

"Kanobi here. He's out cold on the cabin floor."

He listened for a moment.

"He'll keep or I can toss him overboard."

A scowl formed on his face as he listened to the reply.

"If you say so, boss. But I can't see any sense in keeping him here."

Kanobi hung up. He muttered to himself as he turned away from the phone. "Something's sure wrong." He sat down in his chair with the rum bottle in his hand and scowled down at the unconscious man lying on the floor. He had done a fine job of kidding the smart agent. He had done his part, but apparently Kong's plans weren't working out. Well, he'd know soon. Kong and the others were coming to the boat.

6. PRISONER

Kanobi finally roused himself and went on deck. He took his bottle with him. Seating himself at the rail, he waited. The drugged agent in the cabin would be out until morning. Kanobi took a deep drink and leaned back. The bottle was half empty.

A half hour later a jeep pulled up close to the landing platform where Kanobi kept his dinghy when on shore. The captain carefully set his bottle on the deck and got to his feet. He climbed carefully over the rail and slid down into the boat. After shoving off, he pulled strongly toward shore.

Kong, Frank Nago, John Kuhio, and Tasa Moto were waiting on the platform when he pulled alongside. Kanobi scowled as he looked at the materials piled on the planking. They had brought along the transmitter and a number of boxes. He'd probably have to make at least three trips to deliver them and their things to the freighter.

"Get us aboard," Kong snapped impatiently.

"Hop in," Kanobi answered sourly.

"You wait here," Kong said to Kuhio. "Help with the transmitter and boxes." He and Nago and Tasa got into the boat. Kanobi shoved off and started rowing.

When they reached the freighter, the three went aboard. Kanobi started back. On deck Kong paused to look around. He spotted Kanobi's bottle and picked it up. He held it toward the light before tossing it overboard.

"Another half hour and he'd have been dead drunk," he growled.

The three went down into the cabin. Tasa caught her breath as she looked down at Kent. Kong knelt and felt the pulse in Kent's wrist. He glanced up at Nago.

"Drag him into the hold. Tie his hands and ankles." Kong stood up.

Nago looked distastefully at Kent. "Why not wait for Kanobi and Kuhio? He's heavy."

"You can handle him." Kong sat down and watched Nago get a grip under Kent's arms. The little man was strong but he grunted as he started to drag the unconscious agent out of the cabin.

Tasa sat on a bench at the table. She was wondering what was going to happen to her now that her usefulness had ended. Since joining Kong's group she had learned that anyone working for this ruthless organization was expendable. She was sorry she had not used her feminine charms on Nago. But he was such a repulsive man. His touch always made her shudder.

Kuhio and Kanobi came aboard with the transmitter and boxes. Nago returned from the hold. They all assembled in the cabin.

Kong spoke rapidly. "We get underway at once," he said to Kanobi.

"Where to?" Kanobi asked.

"The usual berth at Honolulu. You have some cargo to deliver, haven't you?"

"Pineapples," Kanobi answered. "How come we're getting out of here?"

"You did a good job in taking Barstow. But he alerted Intelligence at Hickam. They're raiding the island at dawn. He even pinpointed the house for them," Kong snapped.

"I intercepted his calls," Nago explained.

"Lucky we planted Kanobi here," Kuhio said.

"That wasn't luck, that was careful planning. He was certain to start asking questions," Kong answered.

"Can't see why we have to cart him around," Kanobi grumbled.

"He knows all about Air Force Intelligence. I don't have the time or the proper drugs to soften him up so that he will talk." He scowled. "I have orders to deliver him alive."

"Be risky getting him all the way to Bangkok," Kanobi argued.

"We've had more than enough talk. Get this boat underway. We have to be clear of her before the Navy starts looking for her, as they will," Kong said impatiently.

Kanobi led the other two out of the cabin. Kong busied himself setting up the transmitter and hooking it into the ship's antenna. Tasa started heating up the coffee. Kong paused in his fussing with the transmitter.

"Throw that out," he ordered. "It's drugged. How do you think Kanobi was able to knock out Barstow?"

Tasa emptied out the coffee and grounds. She shuddered as she looked into the slop bucket.

"Make a fresh pot." Kong stepped back from the transmitter. He was well satisfied with himself. He had eliminated a dangerous opponent. His mission was going smoothly. He knew the hour of departure of the transport, the arrival date, and departure time from Guam. He had the complete flight plan and had transmitted it to his superiors. One bit of information had to be sent, that was news that he had captured Kent Barstow; but that could wait.

Kent awoke with an effort. He groaned and opened his eyes to total blackness. His head ached with a dull throbbing pain. He lay there trying to remember what had happened. He was aware of a strong odor around him and after a few minutes recognized it as the smell of pineapples. He discovered that his wrists were bound and also his ankles. Slowly he began to remember. A boat! What was its name? Maalaea Bay. Her skipper. Coffee. He had been cleverly conned by one of the gang he was hunting. Marvelous actor, that Kanobi. He was beginning to think straight.

He was also beginning to realize how bad the situation was. He listened. There was movement under him and the steady vibration of engines. Diesels, he decided. He was aboard the freighter and she was moving. He tested the cords that bound his wrists. They were expertly knotted.

He was badly in need of a drink. His mouth was dry

as dust on a desert. Licking his lips, he tried to swallow. The effort was almost more than he could manage. Why had they kept him alive? He thought hopefully that it might be because they wanted to force him to tell them what the flight plans were for the transport. He was glad he didn't know. Of course, they might already have that information. Kent shuddered. He had certainly bungled this one.

A light appeared above as a hatch was opened. Kent heard boots on the ladder leading into the hold. He blinked and turned his head. There were piles of pineapples around him. He looked up into the face of Kanobi. The captain grinned down at him.

"How's the insurance business?" Kanobi asked.

Kent just stared up at the big man.

"If you feel up to sitting up you can have a swig of water. I once got slipped a mickey . . . out in Hong Kong. Woke up a bit dry." Kanobi held out a canteen.

Kent struggled to a sitting position and shook his head. Kanobi knelt and held the canteen to Kent's lips. Kent gulped a swallow of water. The tightness in his throat eased. He took another swallow. Kanobi let him have two more swallows before pushing him over on his back. He laid the canteen beside Kent, then began stacking pineapples over him. Their spines jabbed his hands and face. He knew it would do no good to kick out with his feet, but he could hardly resist the temptation to drive his heels into the big man's belly as he bent over him.

He was completely buried before Kanobi stopped piling

pineapples over him. Air enough seeped down between the loosely piled pineapples to allow him to breathe, but when he tried to heave himself upward he found that he didn't have the strength to heave off the heavy fruit. When he did move a little the spines on the pineapples stabbed him. He licked blood from his upper lip.

Covering him up must mean that his captors expected to be searched. He wondered if Major Dunn would connect this boat with the gang. He had talked to the Major about the possibility of their using a boat. He guessed that when they found the Cessna parked at the airfield, Dunn would start looking for a boat. But it would not be until after he had located the house and learned that his quarry had fled. By that time the gang could be hidden on another island. Kanobi had probably established himself as a freighter. It was likely that he was the legal owner of the boat. It was not unusual for a man to own a tramp freighter of the size of the Maalaea Bay.

The boat moved along and now Kent judged it was traveling at top speed. The engines were throbbing and the hull vibrated steadily. The first indication that the journey was about over came when the boat started rocking as it cut through offshore swells. Luckily Kent had not regained consciousness until they neared Honolulu.

The freighter suddenly slowed down and soon it appeared to be drifting. Kent felt movement above him and soon the weight on his body lessened. A little later his face was uncovered. Kanobi and another man were tossing the

pineapples off him. When he was uncovered, Kanobi laughed.

"Looks like you've been fightin' a couple of wildcats, eh, Kuhio?"

"Or a native gal," Kuhio said and grinned down at Kent.

Kanobi reached down and pulled Kent to his feet. The light in the hold was dim, but Kent saw that Kanobi had a heavy knife thrust inside his belt. Kuhio wore a shoulder holster and revolver. The outfit looked very much like the one Kent had worn when he boarded the freighter.

"I'm cuttin' loose your legs," Kanobi said. "We don't aim to pack you. Try to make a break and we'll cut you down. That's been my idea from the start."

Kanobi knelt and pulled out the long knife. He slashed the cords binding Kent's ankles. He arose and shoved the point of the knife against Kent's ribs.

"On deck with you."

Kent moved toward the ladder leading to the open hatch above. With his hands tied he had trouble climbing up. He moved slowly. Below him the angry voice of Kanobi roared at him.

"Get a move on!"

Kent was tempted to smash a boot into the ugly face close below him. It would get him nothing but a momentary satisfaction. What he had to do was wait for a break. He had to get loose fast because time was running out. He had perhaps one day, today, to get away and warn MATS of the danger. Perhaps Major Dunn would do it, but he

might not be able to convince the commander that there was real danger. Kent knew how to do that. He'd let Jefferys talk to the commanding officer.

Kent climbed out on deck and looked around. The freighter was close in shore but not in Honolulu Harbor. The coastline was rugged and barren. He could not see a single house. He moved to the rail and looked down. The ship's dinghy rode below and there were two men and a girl in it. When the girl looked up, he recognized her as Tasa Moto. She did not smile at him, she looked frightened. Kanobi stepped up behind him and jabbed him with the point of his knife.

"Get down into the boat," he ordered.

This suited Kent. He eased himself over the rail and started cautiously down the rope ladder. He was sure that both of the men in the small boat were armed. He dropped into the boat and faced the two men and the girl. He spotted the boss man at once. Kong glared at him, Nago smiled.

"Sit down and behave, Barstow," Kong said.

Kent sat down facing the stern where Tasa was huddled. Kong joined her, leaving the dapper little man at the oars.

"Get moving, Nago," the big man ordered.

Nago slipped the mooring line, manned the oars, and started pulling. He was small and could not have weighed more than one hundred and thirty pounds but he could handle a boat. As they moved away, the Maalaea Bay swung away from them and headed up the coast.

Kent studied the leader openly. Kong ignored him. He growled at Nago.

"Can't you make this boat move?"

"I'm doing my best, Kong," Nago answered sharply. "You're built better for this work than I am."

Now he had all of their names. If he escaped, he'd know them all and he'd hunt them down. They'd never leave Oahu. He'd button the island up and search every foot of it. It was heady thinking. The trouble was that he was sure the big man would make it tough for him to get away.

As they moved into a tiny inlet between black lava rocks, Kent saw that there was a jeep waiting. A leathery-faced old Oriental sat at the wheel. Nago beached the boat on a shelf of rock, taking neat advantage of a small swell which rolled in.

Kong pulled a heavy automatic from inside his coat. He balanced it easily with the muzzle covering Kent's stomach as he got to his feet.

"Get out," Kong ordered. "Stand beside the boat."

Kent got out and stood close to the boat. Kong followed Nago over the side with Tasa trailing behind. Both men now had drawn guns.

"Move." Kong jerked the gun muzzle toward the jeep.

Kent moved. When they reached the jeep, Kong motioned to the seat beside the driver. Kent climbed up. The Oriental glanced at his bound wrists and shrugged his thin shoulders. He was a frail old man, mostly bones. The two men and the girl squeezed into the back seat.

The Oriental started the jeep and swung it around. Kent

looked ahead for a road but saw none. There were open spaces between the shrubs and trees. A tulip tree ahead blazed with flaming red flowers. Monkey-pod trees lifted their round flat foliage. The driver maneuvered expertly through the tangled growth. Kent would have enjoyed the orchids which grew in profusion if he hadn't been facing an unknown fate.

They drove for a mile and finally came to a dim road which led to the top of a hill. Here the trees were denser and taller but Kent at last knew where he was. They were on a slope overlooking Honolulu. The jeep turned into a grove of cocoanut and banana palms and Kent saw a low house with a corrugated iron roof. The jeep stopped.

"Get out." Kong jabbed the muzzle of his gun threateningly into Kent's neck.

Kent got out of the jeep with Kong close behind him. They all walked to the house. A Chinese woman opened the door. Kong jabbed Kent with the gun.

"Inside."

Kent moved into a hallway. There was an open door on the left and a stairway leading downward on his right. Kong motioned toward the stairway. Kent moved to it and they descended to a heavy door with an iron bar which served as an outside latch. Kong reached past Kent and lifted the bar. The door swung inward. Kent entered without being jabbed.

Looking around he saw that he was in a stone-walled cellar. There were no windows. The room was furnished with a bench, a low table and an army cot with one blanket on

it. A bottle stood on the table with a candle stuck in it. Kong tossed a book of matches on the table and backed toward the door. He went out and Kent heard the iron bar drop into place. He sat down on the bench and, in spite of his bound wrists, managed to light the candle. It cast a feeble light on the reddish gray walls.

Kent had an idea he'd have to conserve that candle. He got to his feet and examined the door. It was the only means of escape. He tested it with his shoulder. It was solid hardwood resembling Philippine mahogany, which it might have been. He returned to the bench and sat down. Reaching out, he snuffed the candle. He had best do some real thinking.

7. BUSINESS AS USUAL

Major Dunn was back in his office. He and his men had returned from Kauai. With Kent's observations to guide them, they had found the house in the jungle and searched it. They found nothing that would not have been in a house where four men had lived for several months. There was no evidence that the place had been hastily deserted. There was clothing in the closets, the usual shirts, socks, and other items in the dresser drawers. Everything pointed to the conclusion that the men would be back soon.

The Major's men talked to the local residents. They learned that the four men had kept pretty much to themselves, except for Mal Kanobi who had contacts with growers on the island. He hired dock hands for loading pineapples and cocoanuts. A man by the name of John Kuhio worked ship with him. Once in a while he hired a hand or two. They considered him just another skipper of a small tramp freighter.

They found the Cessna packed where Nago had left it. But the freighter Maalaea Bay had left during the night. Major Dunn found her at the dock in Honolulu unloading pineapples. Her skipper willingly allowed Dunn's men to search the ship.

What upset Dunn and made him go to the general in charge of guerrilla aid to Viet Nam was the fact that Kent Barstow had vanished. The Major considered that very significant. He talked with Colonel Jefferys by phone before seeing the general. Jefferys was upset and insisted that Dunn request a postponement of the flight, at least until Kent showed up.

General Preston Ames listened to the Major carefully. But he was impatient and irritated.

"Those experts are badly needed out there," he said grimly. "This mission has been delayed a number of times. There has been interference from several sources."

"But safety is a MATS 'must,' isn't it?" Dunn asked.

"It is," Ames agreed testily. "But there are limits. Your idea about saboteurs and spies is a bit fantastic. I know it's Jefferys' job to look under beds and behind doors. But we've flown a good many missions into Saigon and never have had any trouble."

Major Dunn sighed. He knew he was licked. "The flight goes out on schedule?"

"At ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

Major Dunn got to his feet. He pulled his cap down tight on his head. "Thank you, sir," he said and left General Ames's office.

Now he sat in his own office and went over the few facts he had. Kent Barstow was missing and so was the girl from the mail room, Tasa Moto. Some mail had been tampered with. Jefferys had picked up some disquieting rumors point-

ing to activity in Hawaii. His phone rang. It was one of the men he had left on Kauai to search for Kent.

"Sergeant Gibson calling from Lihue, sir."

"Any luck?" Major Dunn asked eagerly.

"Major Barstow rented a car here. He talked to a number of people. His rented car was found in the dock area. He was seen leaving a fish-and-chip place with the captain of a tramp freighter, the Maalaea Bay."

"After that?"

"No one saw him after that. From there on the trail is cold," Sergeant Gibson answered.

"You and Carey better report back." Dunn cradled the phone. He regarded the instrument thoughtfully, then dialed a number.

Ten minutes later he got a return call. The Maalaea Bay had put out to sea. That kept him from talking to Skipper Kanobi. He got the Coast Guard on the phone and asked them to trail the freighter and report where she put in. That was all he could think of to do. But the information Gibson had gathered suggested that Kent had either met with foul play or had been kidnapped and taken aboard the Maalaea Bay. If he had been taken aboard as a prisoner he was probably on Oahu. The island was too big and rugged to be searched before ten o'clock the next morning, but the search would be made. He got busy alerting his small crew. When Gibson and Carey got back he would have twelve men. Only two of them were veterans at this sort of thing.

Over at PACAF Headquarters General Ames was briefing

the leaders of the Saigon mission. He was talking to Spud Murphy and four other officers.

"You will be Mission Commander, Murphy. The aircraft crew will take orders from the Aircraft Commander. Under you, there will be Captain Michaels as second in command and Lieutenant Green as third in command."

The three officers nodded. Spud said, "Thank you, sir."

"The C-121 will be carefully checked for bombs and indications of tampering. Murphy, you will check equipment. Inspections and checks will be made two hours before flight time. The transport will be under close guard at all times." The General was taking extra precautions because of the talk he had had with Major Dunn.

Outside the General's office Spud grinned at Captain Michaels. "Brother," he said, "the old boy must be bugged."

"Just cautious. That's MATS," Michaels answered.

"All the same, I'd rather be flying with a MATS crew," Green said.

"I know Captain Williams, the Aircraft Commander," Spud said cheerfully. "He flew plenty of hot missions in Korea."

They headed out to their waiting car and drove over to the dining room. Food was uppermost in their minds.

Down in the stone cellar Kent had spent a bad night. He had worked on the door for hours but could do nothing with it. There wasn't a thing in the room heavy enough to break it loose. He had succeeded in doing one thing, he had freed his wrists from the cords. It had been a pain-

ful experience. He had used the candle to burn away the knots in the cord. A number of raw burns were proof that the job had not been easy.

Kanobi had taken Kent's watch along with his billfold so he did not know what time it was. But he guessed it was after six o'clock because he was in the habit of waking up at six. He might have overslept because of his condition and the fact that he hadn't gotten to sleep until very late.

The fact that the door opened inward gave him some hope. He could stand behind it when it was opened. He dragged the bench over to the wall next to the door and sat down. He would need to know if anyone approached it. Whoever came would be armed, but he meant to make a bid for freedom. If it failed he was sure he'd be securely trussed and kept that way.

Minutes ticked away as he sat listening. He was hungry and thirsty but grimly determined to stay alert. There was no way of judging how much time passed. Finally he had a thought. He carried the low bench to the army cot. Lighting the candle, he fixed the bench under the blanket to make it appear that he was in bed. Snuffing out the candle, he returned to the door and sat down on the stone floor.

He judged he had been sitting on the floor about a half hour when he heard footsteps outside. Kent got to his feet and moved to a spot where he could not be seen by the person who opened the door. He heard the iron bar lift and the door swung open. A flashlight beam knifed across the room and held on the cot. Seconds later there was movement. He looked around the edge of the door. Light from

outside revealed Kong. He held the flashlight in his left hand and his automatic in his right hand, which placed the gun on the side next to Kent.

Kent moved swiftly and noiselessly. He brought the edge of his hand down across Kong's wrist in a savage chop. The gun clattered to the floor as Kent lunged and drove a fist into the side of Kong's head. The big man staggered sidewise and whirled. Kent drove in slashing with both fists. Kong hurled the flashlight at Kent's head. He ducked and it smashed against the wall.

Kong was not a boxer but he knew judo. Kent was aware that he had better not let the big man get a hold on him. He, too, had taken judo training but didn't think he would be Kong's equal. Kong started circling to get to where his gun lay. Kent feinted a left and crossed with his right. The blow caught Kong on the chin but did not stagger him. His hand came up and gripped Kent's wrist. Kent knew what was coming and tried to twist his weight enough to break the hold. He failed and an instant later he was hurled through the air and landed on the stone floor. The impact jarred him badly. Kong was on him at once.

Kent pulled his knees up as the big man lunged in, eager to smash Kent senseless. He kicked out with all of the power he could muster. This, along with the fact that Kong was charging in, gave terrific impact to the blow. It doubled Kong over and brought a savage grunt of pain from him. Kent leaped to his feet as Kong started to straighten. Kent used some of his own judo. He brought the edge of his hand down across Kong's neck. The neck was thick and

short but it could not withstand such a paralyzing blow. Kong's hands dropped and he swayed. Kent chopped again and the big man went down.

Kent stood over the fallen man breathing heavily. He knew he was badly hurt. Landing on the stone floor had about finished him. He was lucky to have been able to deliver the powerful kick. He looked around and found Kong's automatic. Picking it up he checked it, then moved out of the cellar. He closed the door and barred it. Kong would recover after a bit, but he might not be able to make himself heard.

Holding the automatic ready, Kent climbed the stairs. The outside door was open. He looked into the yard. The jeep was not parked outside. Turning to the door that led into the house, he opened it cautiously and looked into a large living room. There was no one in the room. There was a desk in one corner with a telephone on it and a clock. Kent stared at the clock; the time was eleven-twenty. Kent moved into the room slowly. He wanted to use that phone.

He had almost reached the desk when a door opened. Kent whirled. The old Chinese woman he had seen the day before stood staring at him. She opened her mouth twice but no sound came out, then she whirled and fled. If any of the other men were around she would warn them that Kent was loose. He moved to the desk and around it so that he faced the room. Then he started dialing.

Almost at once Major Dunn's voice came over the wire.
"Major Dunn here."

"This is Barstow. Jot down this number and check its location." Kent read the number off the dial. "I may be jumped any second. I fell for a Mickey Finn and got tossed into a cellar up on a slope above Honolulu. Just got loose."

"Learn anything?" Dunn asked.

"Not much. Get somebody up here. I'll take to the jungle and be waiting. Report later."

"The transport took off," Dunn said.

"That isn't too bad," Kent answered. "I'm off." He hung up.

Kent left the house and entered a tangle of jungle close to the palm grove. Seating himself in a thicket he prepared to wait. He reviewed what he had learned and realized it wasn't much. One thing was clear, Kong was up to something that he didn't want an Air Force agent snooping into. It could be any one of a number of things. About all Kent had accomplished was to uncover five foreign agents who could be rounded up. He doubted if the girl was very important. The four men were probably the leaders of an operation. But about the only charge that could be made against them was kidnapping an Intelligence agent.

Kent heard a car coming up the slope. He raised up so that he could see into the yard beside the house. The jeep with its ancient Oriental driver entered the yard and stopped. Nago, Kuhio and Kanobi got out of it. They were met at the door by the Chinese woman. She started talking and waving her hands. Kent couldn't hear what she said, but her words caused an explosion of action. Guns appeared. Nago and Kuhio rushed into the house, Kanobi

ran down the stairs toward the cellar. Kent grinned. He would have liked to see Kong when Kanobi let him out of the cellar.

Presently Kanobi and Kong appeared. The leader did not seem much the worse for his experience, and Kent was too far away to see the expression on his face. The two stood looking out at the jungle. After a few minutes they went inside.

Ten minutes later Kent saw a column of smoke spiral up from the back of the house. The men were probably burning papers and other incriminating material. The Oriental woman had probably told them that Kent used the phone. He didn't think they would linger long. He was right. They came around the corner of the house fast. Kong yelled at the jeep driver who was sitting in the shade of a cocoanut palm. The old man jumped to his feet and ran to the jeep. Kent considered moving out of the jungle and trying to capture the four. He moved toward the edge of the thicket. But he was at least fifty yards from the jeep. They would scatter and start shooting. He might get one but would likely get shot himself. He was in the clear about thirty yards from the jeep when it started off. Flinging himself flat on the ground he took careful aim and fired, not at the men but at the rear tires of the jeep. The big forty-five was an accurate weapon. Kent saw the jeep lurch. He had blown out a right rear tire. He concentrated on the left tire and fired twice, his second shot puncturing the tire. The men in the jeep were now firing back at him. Kent rolled

behind a bush. He had to save the few rounds left in his gun. The jeep lurched on and disappeared.

As Kent got to his feet he saw the girl, Tasa Moto, standing on the porch looking down the road. They had abandoned her. There wasn't room for her in the jeep. Kong probably had no further use for her. Kent walked to the house. The girl did not turn and run. She just stood staring at him, her eyes very big.

"Hello, Tasa," Kent said.

"They left me," she said in a shaking voice.

"Yes," Kent agreed. "So you do not owe them any loyalty."

The girl looked at Kent questioningly, then said, "They kill anyone who talks."

"They won't kill you," Kent said gently.

Suddenly the girl whirled and ran into the house slamming the door shut after her. Kent dived for the door. It was locked, probably a snap lock on the inside. Kent hit it with his shoulder. It was a solid door with a strong lock on the inside. He slammed against it three times before running around the house. The back door was open. Kent entered and started searching the house.

A half hour of search convinced him that Tasa was not in the house. He walked to the back door and stood looking at the wall of jungle a few yards from the house. It was dense and tangled. Finding the girl would take time, but she must be found. He went back to the living room. He had better alert Hickam and have the jeep picked up. The

instant he looked at the desk he knew he wouldn't be able to call Dunn's office. The phone was gone.

Kent sat down to wait for Dunn's men. He wondered how well Tasa knew the slopes above Honolulu. She might have a place where she could hide. She might get to a road and hitch a ride into the city. He was impatiently prowling around the house when he heard cars approaching. His inspection of the rooms convinced him that this was headquarters. Files had been emptied, a fine transmitter had been smashed. There wasn't a scrap of paper left in any of the rooms. Kent went out to meet Dunn's men.

8. WESTWARD HO!

Major Dunn leaped out of the lead car and strode to meet Kent. He thrust out a hand.

"Boy, am I glad to see you. Jefferys has been burning up the wires all morning."

"Glad to be here in one piece," Kent said. "We have things to do fast. Get out an all-points pickup for a jeep driven by an old Chinese. Four men in it. I shot out their rear tires. They have only one spare so they'll probably make a stop at a filling station or garage." Kent gave a brief but exact description of the men.

Dunn turned to a sergeant standing beside him. "Get that, Gibson?"

Gibson nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Put it on the radio, police, sheriff, Air Police."

Gibson hurried to the lead car and got in. Kent said, "Another urgent matter. They left the girl here. She gave me the slip. I figure she will talk where the others won't. She's in the jungle south of the house."

Major Dunn gave orders and his men scattered.

Kent and he sat on the *lanai* and talked. Kent told the Major what he knew.

"It's not much but I think enough to get that transport grounded at Kwajelein," he said.

"You'll have to convince the Commander. He thinks we're stirring up a tempest in a teapot."

"I can bring pressure," Kent said grimly.

"At the Pentagon?" Dunn smiled.

Kent nodded. "Anyway they'll have an armed escort. I have orders to see them safely into Saigon. Neither MATS nor 2nd Air Division at Saigon can prevent that."

"I don't think the General would object to that, so long as the cost isn't charged to him. He aims to use his allotment for bombs and rockets and a few more helicopters, F-28 fighter bombers, and B-26's. Right now it's helicopters he wants, lots of them."

"This one will be on Jefferys' budget." Kent smiled. "Jefferys is tight but not on anything like this."

Two of Dunn's men came out of the jungle and reported. "There's a well-traveled road running down to the city just a couple of hundred yards from here. The girl probably hitched a ride. Three cars passed while we were checking for her tracks." The speaker, a young corporal, looked at his companion.

"That's right," his companion agreed.

"Call the men in and we'll be on our way," the Major ordered.

"Might leave one crew to take the house apart," Kent suggested.

"Good idea. And there's a slim chance the girl might return," Dunn said.

The men straggled in from the jungle. All agreed that Tasa must have hitched a ride into Honolulu. Kent and Dunn took four men with them and headed for Hickam.

The first thing Kent did upon arrival was to bathe and clean up. He had a heavy stubble of beard on his chin and his clothing was torn and dirty. After cleaning up, he visited the officers' mess and ate a big meal. After that he felt ready to tackle Jefferys and the General. He went to Dunn's office to make the Washington call. He knew that the General had been notified that he was safe. He got through to the Pentagon at once, and as soon as Barstow identified himself, Jefferys started in.

"Have you cleaned out that nest?"

"We'll have them in a few hours," Kent answered.

"You got evidence that they planned to sabotage supply and personnel flights?" Jefferys' voice crackled over the wire.

"No. Not any more direct evidence than we had when I started. All we have on them is a kidnapping charge," Kent answered and waited for the expected explosion.

"You got to them. Why didn't you get evidence?" Jefferys' voice was harsh.

"Even if we had caught them on the island of Kauai we probably wouldn't have gotten anything. When we bring them in, they won't talk. You know that."

"It's not good enough," Jefferys snapped.

"And that transport is five hours out, unescorted."

There was a pause. Finally Jefferys spoke. "They're

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probably at Kwajelein now. General Ames can ground them there."

"You better tell him to, sir. He considers our fears to be grounded on flimsy proof," Kent said.

"I'll call him. I'm also putting through an order to furnish you a long-range fighter plane, and it will be signed by the proper authority. I'm going over the heads out there at Hickam. You will stay with that C-121 if it goes on to Saigon. Now get off the line so I can get Ames." Kent hung up.

He grinned at Dunn. "The old man is tackling the General."

"I'd like to listen in. They're both tough and stubborn." Dunn laughed.

Kent decided he might as well wait in Dunn's office. News of the hunt for the four men would come in to the office and Jefferys would call back.

A call finally came in from the sheriff's office. Two deputies had spotted the jeep in a garage where the men were buying new tires. The men were holed up in a back room in the garage ready to shoot it out with the officers. The sheriff was sending reinforcements, but he made it clear he thought the Air Force should capture its own spies. Dunn said he was willing. "Just keep them bottled up until we get there," he said gruffly.

Kent had been listening in on an extension. "Looks like we could use some tough Air Police."

"Security police." Dunn smiled. "They are tough." He started dialing.

Kent decided Jefferys could wait. He wanted to be in on the capture. As they started out of the room, the phone rang. Dunn answered it, then extended it to Kent. "Your call," he said and grinned. "I'll wait for you."

Kent nodded toward the extension phone. Dunn picked it up. Kent said, "Barstow here."

Jefferys' voice came on. "That C-121 gets some sort of escort out of Guam to Manila. But you go along. They leave Kwajelein at seventeen hundred hours, their time. Better take something fast."

"Probably the best bet would be a Voodoo. They have several of them here on TDY. Means three aerial refuelings. Cost you a bit." Kent repressed a chuckle.

"You're going, I've cleared it for you. Get busy."

"We have those four agents trapped in a garage," Kent said. "I'd like to have a crack at them before I leave. Might get a hint of what to expect. With a Voodoo I can catch up to the mission at Guam."

"Don't waste much time on them. Let Dunn sweat them. You can check back with him in flight."

"Yes, sir." Kent heard the receiver click into place at the Washington end of the line.

"Looks like you're going first class," Dunn said with a grin as he headed for the door.

They ran out to the parking lot and got into Dunn's car. In minutes they were speeding off the base. Dunn knew the location of the garage and took the shortest route. It was a

small place at a crossroad well up on the slope above Honolulu. Once clear of residential areas, Dunn pushed the speed up to seventy miles an hour, which was a furious pace for a Hawaiian road. Passing drivers, moving along at forty miles per hour, honked their horns in angry protest.

Dunn swung in at a crossroad garage. The action seemed to be at the back, though there were two officers in front. Dunn parked well away from the building which stood by itself on a corner. They got out of the car and circled around to the back. The sheriff was there with a half-dozen deputies. The chief of Honolulu Police was there with a squad car and four men. All were standing back well out of pistol range. The sheriff was shouting through a megaphone. "Come out with your hands in the air!"

Kent and Dunn joined the sheriff and the chief of police. The sheriff lowered his megaphone. He had not had any experience in handling the desperate-gangster-type of law-breaker, nor had the chief.

"Hello, Major," he greeted Dunn. "Hope your boys bring some tear gas."

"Anyone get hurt?" Dunn asked. This seemed like a pointless question. The officers were safely out of range.

"One of my boys got nicked in the arm. Wanted to be a hero," the sheriff growled.

"They can't get away," the chief said. He unwrapped a cigar and lighted it.

At that moment the Air Force boys arrived. They came in a bus. Fifteen of them piled out, led by a young lieu-

tenant. They were all armed with automatic rifles and carried sidearms. They looked neat and trim, most of them youngsters. They lined up before the lieutenant. He joined Kent and Dunn, saluting the Major smartly.

"At your service, Major," he said.

"We have four tough characters trapped in the room back of the garage," Dunn explained. "They are armed and willing to shoot it out. Foreign agents bent on sabotage." The Major smiled at the lieutenant.

"No sweat about this, sir." The lieutenant pivoted to face his men. "Five of you men stack rifles. Break out the smoke guns."

Five of the airmen stacked their rifles and trotted to the bus. They returned bringing two squat weapons which looked like bazookas. One carried a canvas bag.

"We borrowed these. They're a new type of gadget for smoking guerrillas out of caves or jungle thickets." The lieutenant grinned broadly. "I've been itching to try one out."

"You didn't bring tear gas?" the police chief asked anxiously. He seemed skeptical of the smoke guns.

"No," the lieutenant answered. He turned to his men. "You men on the smoke cannon aim at the two back windows. The rest of you cover the back door and the front entrance, five on each detail."

The civilian officers watched with interest. The sheriff even holstered his service revolver. The chief had never pulled his from its holster. The lieutenant stepped behind the men manning the smoke cannon.

"Ready!" he snapped. "Fire."

The cannons went off with a dull boom. Nothing happened for a fraction of a second. Then the sound of shattering glass rang out. The men had made a hit on the right window. The shell directed at the left window bounced off the iron wall and exploded in a dense cloud of brown smoke which the wind whipped away. The men swiftly reloaded and fired. This time there was a hit on the left window.

The men with rifles stood at attention, their eyes on the back door. Smoke was pouring out of the broken windows. The back door swung open and four men stumbled out with their hands in the air. They plunged forward blindly, stumbling along.

"Close in and make them secure," the lieutenant ordered.

The five riflemen closed in on the agents who had halted and were rubbing their eyes. The five who had manned the cannons picked them up and started for the bus.

The owner of the garage, a small dark-skinned man, was wringing his hands. "You smashed my windows, got my place full of poison gas."

The lieutenant smiled at him. "You'll get new windows. The smoke will just fumigate your garage. It isn't poison. Keep the doors open for an hour." He turned to Major Dunn, who grinned at him.

"Nice smooth work, lieutenant."

The police chief moved in closer. "Any chance of getting one of those cannons from war surplus?"

"I'm afraid not. Even these two will be in the Far East

in ten days." He turned to Dunn. "What do you want done with the prisoners?"

Dunn nodded toward Kent. "This is Major Barstow of Intelligence. We want to question them as soon as possible."

"I'm Lieutenant Mercer. Glad to meet you, Major." The Lieutenant extended his hand. "I've met Major Dunn a few times." They shook hands.

"We'll follow you in," Dunn said. He turned to the chief and the sheriff. "Thanks for keeping them pinned down for us."

"Quite all right," the sheriff said. The chief was busy relighting his cigar, but he nodded.

Kent and Dunn walked to their car. They waited until the bus pulled out and followed it. Kent spoke suddenly.

"That Kanobi character has my service revolver and holster. Must remember to collect it."

"The boys gathered up all of the guns. You'll get it back."

"Those boys made a pretty tame show out of it." Kent grinned. "Not half the action I had this morning when I tangled with the boss."

The bus turned in at the stockade and the prisoners were unloaded. They were a surly lot. Kent smiled at Kanobi.

"The insurance business is picking up, skipper," he said pleasantly.

Kanobi scowled at him. Kent guessed the big fellow wouldn't be as talkative as he had been aboard the freighter. This proved to be true when Kent and Dunn started questioning the four men. Kong refused to answer

any questions at all. He just stared stolidly back at Kent and the Major. Kanobi insisted that he was a legitimate shipowner engaged in island trade. He said he had never seen Kent Barstow before.

"We can get witnesses who saw you together," Dunn warned.

Kanobi shrugged his shoulders and lapsed into silence. Nago and Kuhio followed Kong's example. After a half-hour Kent and Dunn gave up.

"Lock them up," Dunn said to the guards.

They watched the four march away. Kent said wearily, "Hope they find that girl."

"We'll find her, all right. We have bulletins out on her. Two men are backtracking on her past. We'll get her even if she manages to get to another island. She was born on Guam and lived there a number of years. We have her service record." Dunn was confident.

"Tough spot for crooks. No place to go," Kent said. "I better get going on my flight plans." They headed for the door.

9. VOODOO FLIGHT

Kent Barstow was very familiar with the F-101 all-weather fighter interceptor. He had test-flown it at Edwards Air Force Base in 1954. The C model had once established a world's speed record of 1206 miles per hour. On a long flight its cruising speed would average about 640 miles per hour. It was armed with four M-39 twenty-millimeter cannons and Sidewinder air-to-air rockets. It was a fine aircraft, though no longer in production, having been outclassed by the F-102 Delta Dart, the F-104 Starfighter, and the F-105 Thunderchief, along with the F-106.

Kent discovered that an F-101 was available with extra fuel tanks which would allow him to reach Kwajelein and Guam with only one air refueling. This would please Jefferys very much as it would reduce the strain on his budget. Kent figured his time from Hickam to Kwajelein would be two and one-half hours. From there to Guam would be two and one-quarter hours. He would overtake the slow-flying C-121 at Guam.

Crew chief Sergeant Winters was very proud of the F-101. He didn't know Major Barstow and didn't much like trusting one of his pets to a strange pilot.

"She's fast on the trigger," he warned. "Watch that afterburner."

Kent grinned. "I know she's fast and tricky," Kent said. "I test-flew one at Edwards."

"Been some changes since then," Winters said, giving Kent a grudging nod of approval.

"I'll bring her back in one piece," Kent promised.

"Hope so, sir," Winters muttered. He had spent several hours inspecting the work his crew had done on the F-101. If the Major had trouble, it would be no fault of his, he was certain of that. He helped Kent with his gear and gave him a hand up. The canopy shut and locked. Kent got himself set. He called in to the control tower.

"Red Flight One to tower."

"Tower to Red Flight One. Red Flight One, come in," a voice from the tower said.

"Red Flight One ready for takeoff. Over."

"Tower to Red Flight One. Use Runway Eight. You are cleared for takeoff."

Kent went through a swift checkout, then eased on the power. The F-101 shuddered a little, then eased out toward the flight line. Reaching the end of the runway, he swung the Voodoo around and halted to his last check in.

"Red Flight One to tower. Over."

"Red Flight One. Come in. Over."

"Red Flight One to tower. Am taking off 1600 hours plus ten minutes. Over and out." Kent snapped off the radio and eased himself into the snug-fitting ejection seat. He glanced down the runway and smiled. This was a mo-

ment that always gave him a big thrill. He eased on the power, and the F-101 started moving, gathering speed instantly until the heavy craft was blasting over the hard-top with the runway knifing past below. The scream of the Pratt Whitney J57-P-35 turbojets grew fiercer as the afterburner shoved the engine thrust up to seventeen thousand pounds. It was swept away and trailed the fighter as she lifted and knifed upward.

Kent looked down on the island of Oahu. Honolulu was beneath him for a few minutes, Waikiki Beach, Diamond Head far back, Pearl Harbor, then Barber's Point below. Then blue water. He would have that under his wings for two and a half hours. He quickly climbed to a ceiling of thirty thousand feet and set his course.

The Voodoo knifed on through the sky. Kent watched his fuel gauges, and when they indicated refueling, he contacted the tanker which had been alerted to intercept him. This was routine. The tanker eased in and contact was made. The tanker dropped away, dipping a wing, and Kent was alone high above the Pacific.

After a half hour he called Kwajelein. "Red Flight One calling Kwajelein. Do you read me?"

A voice answered. "Kwajelein. Red Flight One we read you loud and clear. Out and over."

"Red Flight One to Kwajelein. Out of Hickam at 1600 hours plus ten minutes. Plan to arrive 1800 hours plus forty minutes. Over and out."

"Kwajelein to Red Flight One. Keep in touch. You are cleared for 1800 hours plus forty minutes. Over and out."

Kent snapped the transmitter off. He looked down upon the billowing mass of white clouds. Patches of water could be seen where there were holes in the clouds. He checked his air speed and gauges. Everything was functioning smoothly. He recalled once flying this route in an old C-54 and grinned. That time he had crawled along at a speed of less than two hundred miles per hour. It had been a long slow grind. He glanced at his watch. He had already eaten up many miles.

Half an hour out of Kwajelein he checked with the tower for the third time. He was on schedule to the minute, and repressed a desire to increase the thrust of the J57 turbojets.

Fifteen minutes later he called in again.

"Red Flight One to Kwaj tower. Do you read me? Over and out."

"Kwaj tower to Red Flight One. We read you loud and clear. Over and out."

"Red Flight One to Kwaj tower. Request instructions for landing. Over and out."

"Kwaj tower to Red Flight One. Come in on Runway One. Wind twenty knots—south by east. Ceiling five thousand feet. Over and out."

Kent was below the cloud cover and dropping in fast. He nosed in on Runway One and lowered his landing gear. The black-top whipped past under him as his wheels touched and bit. The Voodoo slowed quickly to a taxi speed. Kent eased it around and paused to wait for the "follow-me" jeep which was moving out fast to meet him.

A Lieutenant Gordon was waiting at the flight-line gate to meet him. Kent turned the Voodoo over to a ground crew and joined the Lieutenant. They shook hands.

"Gordon, sir," the Lieutenant said.

"Barstow," Kent answered. He had heard of Gordon, but he had never met him.

"Jefferys wants you to call him," Gordon said.

Kent nodded. "Everything quiet here?" he asked.

"Dead." Gordon grinned. "But Jefferys has kept us busy looking behind bushes."

Kent laughed. "He has a long arm."

Kent's flight bag arrived and Gordon drove him to the BOQ. At Bachelor Officers' Quarters Kent showered, then went to dinner at the Officers' Mess. Before eating he called Jefferys. The boss was in his usual ruffled mood.

"They are having a little engine trouble with the Connie," he said. "At least part of the flight to Clark Air Base will be night flying. I don't like it but can't get them to lay over."

"Should be safer than daytime and the delay could cross up our friends."

"Unless they have a transmitter hidden on the island. There are a lot of construction workers out there now." As usual Jefferys had found something to worry about.

"I'll check around. Have a few angles in mind," Kent said.

Jefferys grunted, but he did not ask what the angles were. "Keep in touch," he said and rang off.

After dinner Kent visited with the Intelligence men

based at Kwajalein, then went to his room and read until he got sleepy. He planned to be up and off early. He wanted as much time as he could get at Guam. He had a feeling it would definitely be a nerve center for the enemy. With a lot of civilian workers there, agents could be moved in very easily.

Kent was off by five o'clock the next morning. Lieutenant Gordon saw him off. He seemed a bit envious because Kent was going to see action while he sat at a desk and did paper work or poked about on petty errands. The flight to Guam was uneventful, a duplicate of the flight to Kwajalein. Kent checked in at seven-twenty, five minutes over his anticipated landing time. He had bucked stiff headwinds all of the way.

Kent found the eight technicians and the flight crew of the C-121 in the recreation room at the base. The men were lounging around playing cards and drinking coke. Spud Murphy grabbed Kent at once.

"Hear you're to be our bird dog," he said with a grin.

"Who told you that?" Kent asked sharply.

"Nobody, I just guessed when you showed up. Remember I sat in on a session with you and Dunn at Hickam." Spud's grin broadened.

"That's right," Kent agreed. "But I'd as soon it wasn't mentioned here. I'll have to brief Captain Means and First Officer Gil Purdy. The others won't need to know unless there is trouble. Who is in charge of the technicians?"

"Me," Spud answered. "Captain Michaels is second officer, Lieutenant Green is third officer."

"You may as well brief them," Kent said.

"Both good men," Spud assured him. "Old heads."

"How about the crew of the C-121? Know anything about them?" Kent asked.

"Captain is Means, a vet from the Korea fracas. First Officer Gil Purdy, no Air Force service, a bit green I'd say. Engineer is Myron Brown, nice chap but no Air Force service. The flight attendants are Tom Miller and Kirby Grant, a couple of soured apples, I'd say."

"O.K. I'll look them over. Have to get on the ball. See you before you take off tonight." Kent wandered away.

He soon spotted the crew of the Constellation. The three flight officers were playing gin rummy at a table. The two flight attendants were standing close to a side door talking. It was easy to spot all of them because they wore airlines uniforms and caps. Kent studied the two flight attendants. They appeared to be having a serious talk. One of them kept looking out through the open door as they talked. Kent strolled past close to the two men and glanced at them. He wanted to know if they would notice him. They didn't. Kent was able to identify them by the names on their jackets. Grant was the one watching the yard outside. He was a sallow-faced man of perhaps thirty. His nose was hooked and his chin small and pointed. Miller was shorter by several inches and had a beefy red face. His hair was straw-colored and needed cutting. Kent decided they were a pair worth watching. He stopped at a water cooler and filled a paper cup.

As he lifted the cup he watched the flight attendants

from the corner of his eye. Grant moved through the door and Miller followed. Their actions seemed wary. They glanced back as they left, evidently to see if anyone noticed their leaving. Kent tossed the paper cup into a wastebasket and headed for the door.

10. HOT TRAIL

Kent swerved away from the door and halted at a window covered by Venetian blinds. They were closed against the sun. He lifted one slat a little and looked out. Grant and Miller were strolling down a shrubbery-bordered walk, apparently out for a walk. Kent could not show himself until they were well away from the building. The two men turned right and walked along a hedge. Kent could see their heads moving above the hedge. He waited because the men occasionally glanced up toward the building.

Remembering that there was a hedge along the front walk, Kent hurried to the front door and stepped out. He bent over so that the hedge hid him. Lifting his head carefully, he looked below. The men had left the hedge and were heading toward a greenhouse which was smothered with flowering vines. Kent moved swiftly down the curving walk, keeping his body at a crouch.

When he reached the driveway he saw that he was in luck. The hedge he was following curved and followed the drive. It passed some ten feet from the greenhouse. Kent moved along swiftly. When he reached the end of the hedge, he knelt down and looked the place over, exposing only enough of his head to allow him to see. The foliage

and flowers were so dense that he couldn't see inside the greenhouse, but he could hear low voices. His eyes wandered over the surrounding terrain. There was what amounted to a jungle at the far side of the greenhouse. But the sound of the voices came from inside.

Kent was sorry he had not alerted Major Hockner, head of Intelligence on Guam, as soon as he arrived. He had not expected to stumble onto anything so soon. He had found no one in Hockner's office when he called. He should have called back. Of course, the two men might have slipped out for a drink; they might have had a bottle. Now the question was how to get close to the greenhouse without being seen. There wasn't much cover between himself and the mass of vines covering the house.

Kent used the approach of a stalking cat. He moved out on all fours, crawling five feet, then freezing, crawling another yard, then freezing again. The third move took him to the wall where he eased himself into the thick foliage. He judged the wall of vines to be two feet thick. Now the voices were clear—three of them. They spoke in English, although one had a thick foreign accent.

"You are sure you weren't followed?" it asked.

"Naw," one of the men answered in a surly voice.

The other man said, "Those Intelligence guys asked us a lot of questions. We had the right answers, eh, Grant?"

"They don't suspect us. There wasn't a one of them around the recreation hall. We met all four of them," Grant said.

"When do you take off?" the foreign voice asked.

"Five o'clock tonight. They got the engine trouble located. Should be ready by five," Grant said. He seemed to be the leader of the two.

"You have guns?"

"Yeah," Grant answered.

"You know just how you are to take over?"

"Yeah," they both answered.

"If you don't take over and change course, you'll be shot down," the foreign voice said.

"We'll take over and head her for North Viet Nam. After that we get an escort, eh?"

"That is right."

Kent carefully parted the vines. He was glad the support poles were at least three feet apart. Looking into the interior he saw a squat, dark-faced man facing Miller and Grant. The man was turning away, moving toward a narrow opening in the side of the greenhouse. Kent drew his service revolver and brushed aside the vines, plunging inside.

"Stand where you are!" he snapped.

The dark man looked back and ducked, placing Miller between himself and Kent's gun. He dived out through the small opening. Miller and Grant whirled clumsily to face Kent. Their faces mirrored dumb surprise.

"Get your hands up!" Kent snapped. He'd have to be satisfied for the moment with a bag of two. Later he'd round up the dark man with the help of Hockner and his men. The main thing was that he had put an end to the kidnap threat.

"Who are you?" Grant asked, his lips twisted into a snarl.

"Keep quiet. You two are under arrest." Kent moved cautiously toward the men. "Turn around. Lock your hands at the back of your heads."

The men turned slowly and locked their fingers at the back of their heads. Kent frisked them expertly and took a flat automatic from each.

"Now move. To the recreation hall."

"You ain't got nothing on us," Grant growled. "It's our word against yours. Two against one."

Kent laughed. "Before we get through with you we'll have plenty," he said grimly.

Kent halted his prisoners outside the door of the recreation hall. He motioned with his revolver to a pair of Air Police seated in a parked jeep. They took a second look and piled out of the jeep.

"What's going on here?" one of them asked. They had no way of knowing what Kent's rank was.

"These men are under arrest. I am Kent Barstow, Major, United States Air Force," Kent said. He slipped his ID card from his blouse pocket and passed it to one of the Air Police. "One got away. I have to contact Major Hockner at once. Lock these men up. No one is to contact them."

The policeman handed the ID card back. He glanced keenly at Kent. "Intelligence, I suppose," he said.

Kent nodded.

"We'll take over, sir," the Air Policeman said.

Kent lowered his revolver and slipped it into his shoul-

der holster. The two policemen marched Miller and Grant toward the jeep. Kent hurried into the recreation hall and rushed to a phone.

He got Hockner's office at once.

"Pacific AF. Section six," a voice said.

"May I speak to Major Hockner. This is Major Barstow."

"Yes, Major. We've been expecting a call." Kent heard the man call to Hockner. "Barstow on the phone, Major."

Hockner came on. "Glad you got here, Major. Where are you?"

"At the recreation room. I nabbed two saboteurs but a third got away. It's imperative that we round him up before he gets to a transmitter. I'm sure he's local," Kent said.

"Got a description so we can put out a police alert?"

Kent described the dark man and told Hockner in which direction he had been heading.

"Sounds like a fellow by the name of Radisky. We've had an eye on him for some time. I'll have the sergeant here get out the alert. Be down to pick you up in a few minutes." Hockner hung up.

Kent waited impatiently. Ten minutes later Hockner appeared. In the meantime Spud came over. He sensed excitement.

"What's up?" he asked as he watched Major Hockner stride into the room.

"Caught a couple of hot ones," Kent said. "One got away, we're going after him."

"I'll go along," Spud said eagerly.

Kent was glad to have trained help. "Fine." He turned and extended a hand to Major Hockner.

"Welcome to our island, Barstow," Hockner said pleasantly.

"Good hunting on your island," Kent said and grinned. "This is Captain Murphy. Guess you've heard of him."

"Sure have," Hockner said. He smiled at Spud. "Hear you transferred. Going to do some real hunting?"

"Got a bit bored," Spud said. "Let's go get the crook on the loose."

They moved out to Hockner's car and got in. "This fellow Radisky runs a fishmarket down on the beach," the Major said as they drove away. "He owns a jeep. Suppose we shake his place down first."

"Sounds like a good start," Kent said.

"Who were the men you caught?" Hockner asked.

"Two flight attendants in the C-121 crew. The deal was to kidnap the Connie and fly it to North Viet Nam."

"Jefferys wasn't having a pipedream," Hockner said grimly.

"Told you they were a sour pair," Spud said.

They were racing along at seventy-five miles per hour, so talk was difficult. The Major swung down toward the beach and pulled up before a shack that had a stand out in front. A teenage boy was selling a woman fish. They were haggling loudly but stopped when the three men jumped out of the car. The woman looked at Hockner's uniform, then at Spud and Kent, then turned and hurried away. The boy was clearly frightened.

"Where's Radisky?" Hockner asked, stepping close to the boy. Kent and Spud barged into the shack. Kent had drawn his service revolver.

"He gone," the boy said nervously and waved an arm in a half circle. "Go take fish to mess house."

Kent and Spud did not have to do much searching. All there was in the shack was a pallet with a blanket on it. A small oil stove, some dishes and a low table. It was clear that if Radisky lived there he sat on the floor oriental fashion. There were no cupboards or closets, no place to conceal a transmitter. Kent and Spud returned to the stand. Hockner was shaking the boy.

"Where is his other place." Hockner jerked the boy around facing him.

"Me not know," the boy whimpered.

"Want me to lock you up?" Hockner asked.

"Sometime he go to hill," the boy said. "Good grass to pack fish."

"Round Hill?"

"I guess. He say good grass on hill." The boy jumped back as Hockner released him. He darted around the shack, running like a scared rabbit.

"Round Hill," Hockner said. "Lots of timber. The grass business could be a cover up. Let's go."

They were off again at high speed. A rutted, little-used road led up to the base of a small hill that was little more than a knoll. But it was wooded, with tall grass in the clearings. The road ended abruptly at a rock pile. There was no sign of a jeep. But when they examined the road

ahead of them they saw tracks where a car or jeep had recently turned around.

"Better shake it down while we're here," Kent said.

"First I'll call in," Hockner said.

He got his office on the radio phone and listened. After a bit, he barked, "Hold him." He turned to Kent. "Air Police picked up Radisky. He was delivering fish. But we'll have him if you can identify him."

"If it's the same man, he must have moved fast. Think he could have sent a message and gotten back to his delivering?" Kent asked.

"Be mighty fast work. Want to have a look at that hill?"

"Yes," Kent answered.

They separated and climbed the hill, poking into thickets and tangled stands of timber. It was Spud who discovered the pit. It had been well camouflaged with branches covering a thatch roof, which extended only a foot above ground. The antenna, cleverly hidden in a tall tree, caught his eye. It was something he had been looking for.

"Over here!" he shouted.

Kent and Hockner came on the run. Spud had tossed aside a mat of branches, revealing an entryway. They peered down into a pit five feet deep and six by six feet square. There was just room for a powerful receiver and transmitter. Kent jumped down. Spud and Hockner stayed outside as there was only room for one person in the pit. Kent bent over the set.

"Receiving dial on the local radio station," he called up. "Sending on short range, I'd say about a hundred miles."

"Long-range capability?" Hockner asked.

"Plenty," Kent answered. "You better put a stakeout on it." He scrambled out of the pit.

They returned the camouflage material to its former place and moved away fast. Hockner drove back to his office at a moderate speed. When they got there they found Radisky sitting between two of Hockner's men.

"Have any trouble rounding him up, Sergeant?" Hockner asked one of his men.

"No trouble. He screamed about being taken away from his fish deliveries." The sergeant grinned.

Kent instantly recognized the squat, broad-shouldered man. "He's the one," he said.

Radisky scowled at Kent. Hatred gleamed in his black eyes. "You ruin my business with the fish," he snarled.

"How about your business with that transmitter on the hill?" Hockner demanded.

"Know nothing about a hill."

They all fired questions at Radisky but he had clammed up. He refused to answer questions. He was cunning enough to know that these men would not beat information out of him. For this he considered them weak fools. If the tables had been turned he would have had ways of making a man talk. They gave up and sent him off to the stockade.

"We'll never know if he did send a message. If he didn't, the wolf pack won't know the flight has been delayed and there'll be no shooting," Kent said.

"We'll check around. Someone may have seen him drive up to the hill," Hockner said.

"Looked like deserted countryside to me," Spud said.

Kent agreed, but Hockner was hopeful. "These people wander around a lot. We have plenty of time before five o'clock takeoff time."

"I'd better call Jefferys," Kent said.

Hockner nodded toward a phone. Kent sat down and put through his call. Jefferys listened without breaking in once. When Kent had finished, he said, "Good. Now we have only the possibility of a ground-to-air strike."

"That looks slim," Kent said. "But we're checking to see if Radisky could have sent a message."

"We're leaving nothing to chance," Jefferys snapped. "You escort that transport."

"Can do until dark," Kent said. "Then she's on her own."

Jefferys grunted sourly.

"Once darkness settles, she should be safe," Kent said.

"You fly into Clark Air Base near Manila tomorrow morning anyway. That transport still has to get to Saigon."

"Yes, sir." Kent heard the line go dead. He got to his feet. "Anybody hungry?" he asked.

"Like a wolf," Spud answered.

"Guess I'll do a few things. Get my men to checking, arrange for a stakeout," Hockner said.

Kent and Spud left him busily phoning.

11. NIGHT FLIGHT

Kent and Hockner had a little better luck in questioning Miller and Grant. They were tough hard men, but they had not been trained as undercover agents, and they were not fanatical followers of Communism. Now that their plans had failed, they wanted to get off as easily as they could. If they talked, they might get a shorter term in a federal prison. Because of his close connection with Jefferys Kent did the questioning.

The two men sat facing Kent in Hockner's office. Hockner sat at his desk. His secretary sat beside him, ready to take down the questions and answers. Kent wanted a full report for Jefferys.

"Who contacted you in connection with this plot?" he asked, directing his question to Grant.

Grant was silent.

"You may as well talk. If you cooperate, a judge might not be so tough," Kent said grimly, "though I can't promise you anything. My job is to catch you and to dig up evidence."

Grant looked down at his big feet. Miller stared straight ahead at the wall. Finally Grant shifted his gaze to the secretary.

"A man in Honolulu named Frank Nago."

"Did you meet others working with this man Nago?"

"No." Grant glanced at Miller. Miller nodded his head.

Kent believed Grant was telling the truth. He knew how undercover agents worked. He asked another question.

"How did you happen to meet Frank Nago?"

"We're in and out of Honolulu regular. I met him in a bar, the Barefoot Bar in the Queen's Surf, Diamond Head end of Waikiki's main drag."

"He paid you money?"

"He handed over a thousand bucks to each of us."

"How much more were you to get?" Kent kept his eyes on Grant's face. Then he refused to meet his gaze.

"Twenty-four thousand each," Grant said sourly. The thought of not getting that twenty-four thousand made his face flush with anger. The only reason he had gotten into the affair was the money offered.

"You did this entirely for money?"

"Yeab," Grant growled. "That's a lot of dough."

Kent looked at Miller. "And you, Miller?"

"That's right," Miller said.

"Did Frank Nago discuss any other plans with you?" Kent leaned forward.

"He never talked about anything else, except that the plane would be blown up if we did not change course." Grant turned a defiant gaze on Kent, meeting his hard stare with cold hatred.

"Were you to shoot the two pilots if they resisted?" Kent shot the question at Grant fast.

"We was to do what we had to do," Grant answered.

"You would have shot them?"

Grant hesitated. Miller spoke up. "Wouldn't have been no call to shoot them. We'd just have told them what would happen if they didn't do as we asked."

"Could you have flown the plane?" Kent asked.

"Sure," Grant answered. "I've flown crates like it."

"You're a washed-out pilot?"

"I got framed," Grant answered.

Kent looked at Hockner. "Any questions, Major?"

"Mine can wait until I hear from Jefferys," Hockner answered.

"I guess that's all from me," Kent said and got to his feet. "I want to check the Voodoo."

The phone rang and the secretary answered it. He handed it to Hockner. The Major listened for a couple of minutes, then said, "O.K., Jennings, report in." He looked up at Kent as he put the receiver down. "The boys found no one who saw Radisky drive up to the hill. There were two boys up there but they were on the far side of the hill. No one has approached the transmitter."

"Better check out Radisky's friends, anyone he was seen with off and on." Kent put on his hat.

Hockner nodded. "I'll put Jennings on it. He's good at that sort of thing."

Kent left the office after the guards had marched Miller and Grant away. He followed them down the hallway. They were a sorry-looking pair—stripped of their bravado,

just a couple of men destroyed by their own greed, bitterness, and hatred.

Kent looked at his watch. The time was four o'clock. He'd have time enough to give the Voodoo a thorough checking. He had a base taxi take him out to the flight line. The Voodoo stood gleaming in the hot sun. Kent spoke to the Tech Sergeant who was flight-crew chief.

"Everything gone over, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. She's right as rain."

"You checked the four M-39 cannons?"

The Sergeant gave Kent a sharp look. "Certainly, sir." He smiled. "They don't usually come in loaded for bear."

"Just in case," Kent said and returned the Sergeant's smile.

He busied himself checking. He had great faith in flight crews. Without them to service the hot planes, few pilots would ever grow old. Every man was a specialist in his work, which covered everything from electronics to hydraulic gear. They were a suspicious lot who rechecked anything they doubted or suspected might not be just right. Even so, it was a rule that the pilot also go over his ship. Just as it was routine for a pilot to make a second instrument check before taking off.

Kent had time to drop in at the coffee shop for coffee and pie with Spud before takeoff time. It would be a long time before he saw Spud again. They sat eating pie and drinking coffee.

"Coming back to us after Saigon?" Kent asked.

Spud grinned broadly. "Here's a bit of info that's not known. I've never left Intelligence."

"You mean we have men over there?" Kent asked.

"One of the toughest jobs the Army of South Viet Nam has to handle is getting information on the Viet Congs. The natives are afraid to talk. It's hard to infiltrate the ranks of the guerrillas. I'm supposed to train them, get them hep to our way of working." Spud was suddenly very serious.

"I see," Kent said. "Jefferys didn't want any leaks which would make you a marked man."

"Any man who goes over there is set up as a target, even the men who teach those Viet Nam rice farmers how to use a shovel," Spud said. He glanced at his watch. "I better shove off and get my men lined up."

Kent got his flight bag and went back to the line. He stored it aboard and dismissed the taxi. Seating himself in the shade cast by the Voodoo he watched the loading of the C-121 Super Connie. The cargo-troop carrier had a long record, not only with the Air Force but with commercial carriers. It had a capacity of one hundred six passengers or forty thousand pounds of cargo. Its four 3350 horsepower engines gave it a cruising speed of 370 miles per hour. It was a long, sleek craft, but one vulnerable to missile attack. The Super Constellation was not good at evasive tactics.

Kent's flight crew arrived and joined him. "Say the word any time you are ready to get into your gear, sir," the crew chief said.

"I'll wait until they take off." Kent nodded toward the Connie.

Finally the ramp was removed from the big C-121. The last man aboard was Spud. He paused and waved to Kent. The doors were locked shut and one by one the Curtiss-Wright R3350's roared to life. The transport moved out on the flight line. Kent got to his feet.

"Let's go," he said.

The crew chief and another airman helped him into his outfit, and up into the cockpit. Kent lifted a hand to the crew before locking himself in. He started his instrument check before switching on his phone. He heard Captain Means and Gil Purdy going through their routine checkoff. He waited until the transport was headed down the runway before he called in to the tower.

The C-121 was off and climbing as Kent nosed around and got set. The Voodoo's two engines did not need any warmup. All he needed was the signal from the tower which would send him off. This came a half-hour after the C-121 took off.

"Red Flight One, you are clear," a voice said.

Kent acknowledged the call and shut off the phone. He eased open the throttles, slid away, and leaped forward as the afterburners hurled him up into the sky. Banking tightly he headed out over the ocean, climbing fast. The C-121 had a ceiling above twenty-five thousand feet, but her flight plan called for a twenty-thousand-foot course. Kent went up to twenty-five and leveled off. Ahead and be-

low he could see the big transport. The Voodoo was rapidly overtaking the slower plane.

Kent swung into a big circle, searching the sea for miles around the course of the carrier. At fifty miles out he spotted a ship below and went down in a screaming dive. He knew that he couldn't stop a ship from launching a rocket, but he could let its crew know what would happen if they did launch one. He came down low over the boat, passing so close over it that he could see the startled upturned faces of its crew. It was an open fishing boat. There were no missiles visible. An effective rocket might be compactly designed, but it still would not be small or easy to conceal.

Kent swung around and made another circle. Even at his speed he dropped behind the C-121 when he circled or went down on the deck. He overtook the transport and circled ahead. The cover Jefferys had promised would come out of Clark Air Force Base at Manila. He had an idea they would be night fighters. Spud and his group were due to arrive at Clark by ten o'clock.

By seven o'clock darkness had settled, and Kent could not see a ship if there was one. He might spot running lights, but there would be no way to check a boat in the darkness. He cut in his phone on the Connie's wavelength.

"Red Flight One calling MATS 40-178. Do you read me?"

He switched over and a voice came in, "This is MATS 40-178 to Red Flight One. We read you clear. Over and out."

"Red Flight One to MATS 40-178. I am returning to Guam. See you in the morning. Over and out."

Kent reported to Guam as he headed back. He made the seven hundred and forty miles in one hour even. His crew was waiting when he taxied in on the flight line. As the crew chief helped him out of his gear, he said, "See any bears?"

"Not a single bear," Kent answered soberly.

He loaded his flight bag into a jeep and rode to the Bachelor Officers' Quarters, where he had a room reserved. He had taken his flight bag in case anything came up which made it necessary to go on to Clark.

He decided against calling Jeffcrys. The time in Washington would be five o'clock in the morning. The Colonel might be out of bed, but he wouldn't be in his office. He cleaned up and went out to get something to eat.

12. DISASTER

Spod Murphy had given two airmen duty as flight attendants to take the place of Miller and Grant. His entire group was made up of Air Force men and half of them were qualified to fly the Super Constellation. Many of them had flown Connies. Spud was having coffee in the pilots' compartment with Captain Means. Gil Purdy was flying the aircraft. Spud took a sip of hot coffee.

"Bet you never had so many pilots aboard before," he said with a grin.

"We might fly her on half-hour shifts," Means said.

"You'd have forty volunteers, including myself," Spud said.

"About this cloak-and-dagger stuff . . ." Means grinned at Spud. "Sounds like a lot of loose feathers to me, but I heard your undercover boys picked up my two hands on a serious charge."

"As I said when I briefed you boys, the thing was all planned. Somebody wanted this ship and my men, wanted them bad. Rather, they didn't want them to get to Saigon," Spud said soberly. "Hijacking a plane isn't new stuff."

"And I gave Grant a job because I figured he had gotten a rough break." Means frowned and shook his head. "He

probably got what he had coming when they blacklisted him and lifted his credentials."

"By the time Jefferys gets through with him we'll know all there is to know about Kirby Grant."

"Who's Jefferys?"

"Head of Counter-Intelligence in Washington."

"I thought this Viet Nam thing was a lot of talk, but it looks like a real war," Means said soberly.

"It's a little war, but it's hot," Spud assured him.

Spud looked out into the night. Far below a light winked indicating that a ship was passing below. He glanced at his watch. He figured they were halfway to Clark Air Force Base. A thought flickered briefly in his mind. He was thinking that such a ship might be looking for the winking lights of the Constellation. The thought passed quickly. He got to his feet.

"Guess I'll go back and close an eye."

Spud stepped through the doorway. He didn't take another step. Before his foot struck the floor a shudder ran through the framework of the big aircraft. A huge burst of orange fire flamed outside on his left. There was a crashing sound. The C-121 actually staggered as though she had been dealt a powerful blow. Spud was hurled backward into the pilots' compartment. He landed on his back, rolled over and got to his knees. Means was out cold and so was Purdy. Both were slumped over their controls. As Spud struggled to get to his feet the big transport slid off on one wing in a steep bank.

Spud's one thought was to get to the controls. He

dragged himself to Purdy's side and pulled the unconscious man from his seat. Spud slid into the seat and started fighting to right the craft. He knew by the flaring light on the left that the inboard number two engine was afire. Its explosion had driven pieces of metal through the ship's skin into the pilots' compartment.

Some sort of sidewinder-type rocket, Spud thought. Zeroed in on that engine, heat-guided. He hoped the fiends below had only one. He felt the big plane level off but they were losing altitude at an alarming rate. Michaels and Green appeared and moved in beside him. Green raised Means' head. There was a deep gash across the Aircraft Commander's forehead. Green checked for a pulse.

"Alive," he said to Michaels.

"Get on the radio and send out a May Day," Spud shouted. "Get a pilot up here to help me."

Green had removed Means from his seat and was dragging him back to the passenger compartment. Michaels turned to the white-faced engineer who was working at the radio desk. The engineer was young and he was scared.

Spud got on the intercom and declared an emergency. The two flight attendants were frightened, too. They knew what had happened and they were in the same fix as the others. The airmen were all trained and when they were ordered into Mae Wests, they donned the gear at once. When the escape hatches were pointed out, they noted their location. They tightened safety belts and waited, their eyes on the life rafts. They were tense but quiet as they waited for Spud to give them the word to brace themselves.

"We get hit by lightning?" the radio engineer stammered as Michaels bent over him.

"By a ground-to-air rocket," Michaels snapped. "Get out a call for help, give a location. Keep at it."

"Radio's dead. Stuff blew through the locker. Bombed," he said and shook his head numbly. "Bombed."

"We have electricity . . . juice. Get in and fix the radio," Michaels shouted. The engineer sat and stared at him. It was clear that he was in a state of shock.

"Must be a war," he muttered.

Michaels whirled. He'd get men to work on that radio. There were experts on radio back in the passenger compartment. As he went out Green returned and slid into Means' vacant seat. He slid on his intercom phone.

Spud spoke to him, "Anybody hurt back there?"

"Just shook up."

"Did Michaels get out a May Day?"

"Radio's dead."

"Good, that's all we need." They were both fighting the controls but the plane was sinking toward the ocean. Their altitude was less than two thousand feet.

"We got boys who can make that radio go," Green said.

"They better do it fast," Spud said grimly. Sweat beads were standing out on his forehead.

Michaels returned with two mechanics. They shoved past the engineer and started looking for tools. He seemed to have roused himself. He joined them, getting out tool kits. Michaels bent over Spud's shoulder. Spud pushed his headphones back.

"She's going in?" Michaels asked.

"We may be able to hold her up for a little while. Right now she's hanging on." Spud tipped his head so that Michaels could hear.

"Hang on long enough to let the boys fix that radio."

"Aim to—for several reasons," Spud answered.

"What besides Air Rescue?" Michaels' lips were close to Spud's ear.

"We're sure being monitored by that ship that picked us off. If we get through that will mean a swarm of planes, including fighters. That ship will get out of here. If we're silent it will stay to pick up survivors. It's our men they're after."

"I better get back and check on the men. Have them ready to ditch."

Spud turned his head. "I'm going to put a lot of miles between us and that ship, just in case the radio is shot up so bad it can't be fixed."

Michaels left and Spud replaced his headphones. He glanced at the altitude dial. They were down to twelve hundred feet. The Constellation was again settling. The oil pressure on the left outboard engine was dangerously low. It was carrying none of the load but it was still running. Green's voice came over.

"Left number one's acting up."

"Yeah," Spud answered. "Probably hit by flying metal from number two."

As though to confirm their fears, number one conked out, going dead with a feeble splutter. Its props idled and

stopped. The big aircraft lurched sidewise. Spud and Green fought her back to a level keel. But it was only a matter of time. They now had eight hundred feet.

Spud ordered jettisoning of cargo. There was still a bare chance of staying out of the water. The men were eager to be doing something. They loosened safety belts, opened hatches, and started dumping precious cargo which would have been of great value to the South Vietnamese Army. Several hundred thousand dollars' worth of instruments, supplies, and arms plummeted into the ocean. The two traitors weren't there to get their satisfaction out of seeing the supplies jettisoned.

A smudged and sweating mechanic stumbled out of the radio compartment. He stopped behind Spud and leaned over. Spud shoved back his phones.

"No soap, sir," the mechanic said. "Shot to pieces. No replacement parts aboard."

"Thanks, Sergeant," Spud said. "But keep trying. Hope for a miracle."

Spud pulled an intercom microphone to him. He spoke into it. "Attention," he snapped. "Prepare to ditch in ten minutes."

His announcement over the loudspeaker brought Michaels forward. He took a look at the altitude needle which read four hundred feet. He shouted to Spud and Green.

"I'll send lifebelts forward."

"All I need now is a Mac West," Spud shouted back as

he replaced his phones. He spoke across to Green. "Know what we need now?"

"What?" Green answered.

"We each need a handful of sticks sharpened on both ends." Spud grinned.

"Sticks?"

"For the sharks. When they come at you with their mouths open you slip in a stick. Presto, they can't bite. Fact is they go away and starve to death." Green heard Spud's chuckle, but he didn't smile. He was in no mood for jokes. In fact, he had been thinking about sharks for the past five minutes.

"Better get set for shock," he answered grimly.

Spud was set. He momentarily expected to feel the impact of a very solid ocean.

"Cut the engines," he ordered. "Flaps down." He reached for the controls. Handling the big aircraft was no longer easy, but they had to try to set her down at the best possible angle. His landing lights showed white-capped waves ahead. The troughs seemed ominously deep. Riding a life raft was going to be rough sailing.

There was one comforting thought in his head. He had aboard a load of men who were trained in ditching at sea. There would be no panic. Under Michaels' command they would function smoothly. If they just didn't stick a wing into a wave and turn over they'd all have a chance.

The first warning of contact came when the smooth belly of the Constellation hit the top of a wave. There was a sharp impact which shook the whole aircraft. In seconds

they felt a sharper impact. Spray plumed up over the windscreen. An instant later they were wallowing forward with foam-capped waves smashing at the hull of the C-121. She was down and floundering like a wounded bird. Spud and Green were slammed forward but they managed to get to their feet and get a grip on the back of their seats.

In the passenger section all appeared to be confusion, but actually there was order and purpose. Spud looked the men over. Escape hatches were kicked open, life rafts were being readied.

Captain Means and Gil Purdy had regained consciousness and had recovered. Purdy's head was bandaged and he was feeling fit enough to take to the water. Means had completely recovered. The young engineer had himself under control.

An airman close to Spud said to the man next to him, "I don't swim so good."

His friend answered. "I never did learn. Dirt farmer from Kansas. But you can't sink with these gadgets on."

A corporal was getting his squad of flight mechanics together. He shouted loudly, "Line up, shark bait!"

Spud moved close to Green. "We don't send up flares. Only lights will be flashlights to locate the rafts."

"Right," Green answered.

Spud was thinking about the boat that had shot them down. He didn't want that boat to come to their rescue. Michaels was handling the men firmly. Spud let him go ahead. The procedure was not complicated except for the

pitching of the aircraft. Water was pouring in through the ripped hull and that meant a fast unloading. The rafts were tossed out and were inflated by jerking on their attached cords. With the rafts out, the men started leaving through the open hatches. Most of them dived out without hesitation. Several who hesitated were pushed. Spud and Green stood beside Michaels and watched grimly.

Spud was thinking of the night ahead. When no word came from them, Clark would wait probably until ten o'clock, then send out search planes. Air Rescue would be alerted. He figured their chances of rescue were good even though they could not communicate. The more he thought about it the more his worry about the foreign boat lessened. Air Rescue might not spot them until morning. He doubted if the killer boat would have any better luck.

"We better take off," Green said.

Spud nodded. Green was third officer and would go first. Green grinned at him and lifted a hand, then dived through the hatch. Michaels reached for the inflation ring on his jacket, nodded to Spud before he jumped. Spud stood for a few seconds looking around. The Constellation was settling fast. Water curled and eddied around his ankles. Spud slipped his fingers on the inflation ring. It must not be pulled until he was clear of the hatch. If he inflated the jacket before he jumped he might get hung up and be sucked down when the aircraft sank. He leaned forward and jumped, his hand pulling the release tab as soon as he was clear.

The water did not feel cold as he struck it but a wave

submerged him. He came up quickly and shook the salty wetness from his hair and eyes. Around him a few lights showed where men had located rafts and were aboard. The men had been divided equally on each side of the aircraft so as to avoid crowding the rafts. With rafts for over a hundred passengers there should be room for all.

Spud started swimming toward a lighted raft. Its emergency lantern glowed brightly. As he neared the raft he was able to see by its light that Michaels was climbing aboard. Someone was swimming ahead of him. It proved to be Green. The captain reached the raft and was helped aboard. Spud stroked in and hands were extended to him. He climbed aboard and looked over the men around him. The three officers in command were all in one raft. But that did not matter much. The rafts would not be able to stay together, each would be on its own.

Spud sat down beside Green. "How many rafts did you launch?"

"Eight," Green answered. "And we have eight men aboard."

"Better flash a signal for the rafts to shove away from the aircraft." In the starlight they could see the fuselage of the Constellation, and the big triple tail stabilizers. Her wings were now deep in the water.

Green used his flashlight to signal, winking out the Morse code. "Get clear of the aircraft."

The men aboard the raft started paddling it away from the C-121. They made slow progress because of the choppy sea and the cumbersome raft. They had gone no more than

fifty yards when one wing of the transport lifted against the star-studded sky and the big ship plunged from sight. A big wave surged at them sending spray over them and tossing them high. The men scrambled to bail out the water. Spud grabbed a canvas bucket and started bailing.

A stiff wind was blowing. It piled up great waves. The big raft bobbed up on the crests and sank into the valleys. Spud busied himself checking the supplies aboard. The biggest disappointment was the lack of a radio transmitter. One with even a hundred-mile limit would have been helpful. Finally he sat down to wait.

The wind was blowing eastward and sent the raft back over the course they had followed. They could rig a sail but that did not seem to offer any help. Spud had the lantern turned off. For a time they were able to see the lights of two other rafts but these were soon lost.

Spud looked at his watch. It was a good waterproof watch and it was running. The time was five minutes after ten o'clock. Air Rescue had been alerted for over an hour, he was sure of that. He began listening and scanning the starlit sky. Too early for even night fighters to be near. Air Rescue from Clark and Guam would follow the course the transport had taken.

Another hour passed. The raft was still moving steadily along on an eastward course. Spud stared into the night. There was some talk among the men. But they were chilled as the wind blew on their wet clothing, and spray added to their discomfort.

"Could stand a slug of hot coffee," a land-mine expert said.

"I'd settle for a bed with dry blankets," the man next to him said.

Spud stared ahead into the night. Suddenly he leaned forward. He had seen a light ahead. It was the stabbing beam of a searchlight. It was low down and did not seem to be moving. He nudged Michaels.

"Must be that boat," he said.

Michaels looked. "Sure must be," he agreed.

"We better rig sail and try to get clear. They'll spot us if we stay on this course," Spud got to his feet. "Attention, men," he barked. All faces turned to him. "Enemy boat ahead. Rig sail."

There was a scramble to get the emergency mast and sail up. The men had not sighted the searchlight beam. With the sail set they were able to set a course away from the boat. But steering the raft was difficult. Spud kept the men trying.

They had swung away from the boat which was moving west. Spud figured they were going to slip past her. Then the light beam raised and swept over the raft. It swung back and held on the bobbing lifeboat. The canvas bulk of the raft and the sail showed up clearly in the shaft of light.

"We're sunk," Green said loudly.

All eyes watched as the boat turned and started toward the raft, keeping the searchlight on the canvas craft. Spud kept grimly silent for a time. Finally he spoke.

"If we're taken aboard as prisoners you know what to do. Button your lip and keep it buttoned. Name, rank, and serial number only."

"Could be a friend," an airman said.

"Yeah," another agreed hopefully.

These men had been well trained in guerrilla tactics. They knew what to expect if captured. Spud had confidence in them. He felt no hope that the approaching boat was a friend.

The boat moved in and Spud saw that it was a small craft. When it was within hailing distance a voice called to the raft.

"Ahoy, we're coming alongside. If you have guns, don't try to use them. We have machine guns covering you."

Spud did not bother to answer. He stood watching the boat close in. He could see by the deck lights that the boat was a fishing craft and not a big one. There were a number of men on deck.

The boat came alongside and a man tossed down a rope. "Make fast," he shouted.

"Go ahead," Spud ordered.

One of the airmen made the rope fast. A ladder was tossed overboard.

"Board ship," a man above ordered.

The men in the raft started climbing aboard. Spud was the last to reach the deck. His men were lined up facing a squat man with a curly beard. The prisoners were covered by two sailors armed with machine guns. Spud faced the squat man.

"I am Captain Murphy. You realize that this is piracy, sir," Spud said harshly.

The beard parted and the squat man laughed. "I am Gunner Shultz, skipper of this boat. You are prisoners of war and will be treated as such."

"We will tell you our names, ranks, and serial numbers, that is all," Spud answered.

"That is all I will ask. It will be for others to make you talk," Shultz answered.

At that moment the drone of plane engines was heard. It was very, very low. The approaching craft was far away with the wind carrying the sound.

"Lights out. Get under way!" Shultz bellowed. "Keep the prisoners covered!"

All of the boat's lights were out within a minute and diesel engines started to throb. The boat swung to the starboard and got under way. Spud watched the sky, hoping a flare would be dropped. Shultz had moved close to Spud. He too was watching the sky. Suddenly a flare burst far away. It was too distant to reveal the fishing boat, but it cheered Spud. A rescue plane had probably spotted a lantern in one of the rafts.

"Too bad," Shultz growled. "I wanted more of your men. This is a small catch."

There was starlight enough so that the men with the machine guns could see their prisoners. Presently sailors came and pushed the airmen below deck. Spud was roughly shoved into the hold where two men armed with knives bound his hands behind him and tied his ankles. He was

pushed down upon slimy planking. The hold stunk of fish and fuel oil. Close to where he lay Diesel engines throbbed. Spud could tell they were operating on full throttle. He wiggled to get himself into an easier position, then called to Green.

"Here," Green answered.

"Can you roll over to me?" Spud had to shout to be heard above the roar of the engine.

"Can try," Green shouted back.

Presently he was beside Spud. Spud sat up and they put their heads closer together.

"We have to try to get untied," Spud said.

"What then?"

"Explore this stinking hold. Try to take over. Must be some tools down here. There're eight of us."

13. SEARCH

Kent Barstow was on the phone talking to Jefferys. The Colonel was furious. He wasn't blaming Kent; he was sore at everybody.

"Just what is going on out there?" he demanded.

"The transport is overdue at Clark. There has been no word from Captain Means. Air Rescue and the Navy have been alerted."

"And your plans?" Jefferys asked.

"I'll be over the area at daylight," Kent said. "All we can do now is hope that the search planes spot lights in a raft and can drop flares to check the situation."

"The transport may have been kidnapped," Jefferys snapped.

"That isn't likely. No guns aboard but our own. We did a thorough job of checking."

Jefferys grunted. He was always angry when he couldn't get immediate action. Kent heard the receiver in Washington slam into place.

Kent went to the Operations room to await developments. He knew there was little he could do at night. The best hope lay with Air Rescue and the Navy. Search planes were out and two destroyers, one from the Guam area and one

from Clark, were taking up the route the Constellation had flown. Everyone at Operations was on edge. The blame for the loss of a transport would land in part on them.

Just before midnight a flash came in saying that a night interceptor had sighted lights and had dropped a flare which revealed two life rafts. Another plane was moving in to drop small transmitters and other supplies.

At one o'clock word came in that the two planes had made contact with the two rafts and had located five more. The Connie had been shot down by a new and powerful surface-to-air missile. The radio had been disabled, which furnished a reason for Means not calling for help.

Kent was restless. The minutes seemed to drag. He kept looking at his watch. He planned to take off at 3:30 A.M. That would put him over the rescue scene just as dawn was breaking.

At 1:45 A.M. word came in that all of the seven rafts had reported in. There were only eight men missing and Spud Murphy was among them. Kent got to his feet and paced the floor. Had Spud's raft capsized? The reports said that rough seas were battering the rafts. Then a report came in saying that an empty life raft had been sighted. That accounted for all the rafts, but not for the eight men. Kent mulled over the information and did not like some of the possibilities suggested.

At two-fifteen he went out of the flight line where a crew was checking the Voodoo. The crew chief who had serviced the Voodoo before was on the job. He greeted Kent soberly.

"We hear there's been a big rumble to the west, sir," he said.

Kent nodded.

"Everyone safe?" the crew chief asked.

"Some missing," Kent answered.

Kent rechecked the Voodoo after the crew had finished. The crew helped him into the cockpit and he locked the canopy. Ten minutes later he was out on the flight-line runway with the nose of the Voodoo pointing west. A few minutes later he was off the ground and climbing fast. He kept his radio on to pick up reports on the search for the missing eight men and the progress Air Rescue was making in getting the others out of the rafts.

He learned that a destroyer was closing in and should arrive at the scene of the disaster within five hours. It was a third battlewagon that had been closer to the area than the first two sent out. The eight missing men were still missing.

Kent felt a driving urge to step up the speed of the Voodoo, but he didn't do it. High speed would waste fuel and would get him over the rescue area before there was any light. Kent was certain he had to look for a fishing boat or a freighter. He didn't expect to find Spud and his men on deck waving. He had to pick the right boat in some other way.

Day was just breaking when he reached the area. Two Air Rescue SC-54's were circling and a Grumman SA-16 amphibian was flying low over the life rafts which had managed to close ranks. Kent guessed the SA-16 had come

from Clark. Kent made one pass over the scene and dipped his wings.

As he circled upward he put in a call for Hockner and after some delay got the Major.

"Barstow here," he said.

"Where are you?" Hockner asked.

"Over the rescue area. You'll be talking to Jefferys?"

"Right. He's already called, but I am to call back every hour."

"Tell him I am scouring the area looking for a boat. I have no description of it but hope to identify it." Kent realized he was being vague.

"Be tough," Hockner said.

"Yes. They have probably ditched the launching equipment, though they may have kept it just in case a plane starts snooping."

"Better be cautious," Hockner warned.

"I have a couple of anti-missile rockets on the underside," Kent said.

"Pretty new stuff," Hockner said doubtfully.

"Have to make do. Pass on my report to Jefferys." Kent cut the connection.

Kent sighted the first boat shortly after leaving the area of rescue. Judging by its wake it was under full power. It was heading west with a slightly northern bearing. He studied the boat through powerful glasses. It was a fishing boat, judging by its rigging, one big enough to be seaworthy. There was nothing on its deck to hint at rocket equipment, but he went down over it. As he made the pass

several sailors waved at him. Kent made a second pass. The deck hands were spreading nets along the rail. The distance from the disaster spot was about right, but the boat was acting like a fishing craft. He moved on in a widening circle, after checking the name and home port of the boat. The boat was the Keena out of Manila.

Before flying on to Clark for refueling Kent checked three more boats; two were fishing boats, the third was a freighter. They were the only ones he sighted that were heading west.

At Clark, Kent called Jefferys. The Colonel was still ruffled and angry.

"Eight men probably in the hands of the enemy," he said. "And it looks like you're just wasting jet fuel."

"We can't ask the Navy to stop and search foreign boats," Kent replied.

"No, not on the high seas," Jefferys admitted. "Keep at it as long as you think necessary."

"I figure it would take a high-powered fishing boat five or six days to get to the Asiatic coast," Kent answered.

"If you do spot this boat close to the North Viet Nam coast, get in touch with Saigon. I'll have it set up there for Viet Nam South to send boats to intercept." Jefferys did not talk as though he expected anything to come of this.

"Yes, sir," Kent said and hung up.

Kent spent an hour mapping the area between the rescue point and the coast of Southeast Asia. The curving strip of country bordered by the South China Sea known as Viet Nam was held in the north by Communists. It was only

a guess, but Kent figured the boat he sought might be heading for a North Viet Nam port. Estimating the speed a fast boat would make, he charted the distance it would travel each day. That was the area he would keep searching.

Kent was not alone in his search for the boat. Pilots from Clark Air Base had been alerted and so had the Navy. But he was the only pilot who was making it his sole mission to find that boat. One thing spurred him on and that was the fact that his pal Spud Murphy was aboard the boat.

Kent flew around the area checking boats. He sighted the Keena again on the second day and several other boats he had seen before. All appeared to be heading toward Manila. By the end of the fourth day he was familiar with a number of boats—fishing boats, freighters large and small, quite a variety of craft. He was more interested in the fast boats, but he did not neglect any of them. His interest mounted as the small group he had selected as boats which could have been at the scene of the disaster neared Manila. One in particular interested him, the Keena.

At Clark Air Base Major Killian headed the Intelligence group. He was a veteran in matters concerned with the Far East and was especially interested and attached to the First Air Force's Commando Group operating in South Viet Nam. Kent worked closely with Major Killian. Over coffee at the end of the fourth day they discussed plans.

"You have some suggestions?" Major Killian asked. His lean, sun-tanned face was like leather and his eyes were bright blue. He had them fixed on Kent intently.

"I have listed the boats that I think are probables. Three of them should reach Manila tonight. I'd like to know if any of them bypass the island and head on toward the mainland," Kent said.

Major Killian nodded his approval. "Sound planning," he agreed. "They would normally all put in here, if only for a day."

"The one that does not stop is the one I'm after," Kent said grimly.

"The North Viet Nam coast is nine hundred miles from here. A fast boat could make it in sixty hours, that would be approximately two and a half days." Major Killian produced a long black cigar and lighted it.

"If I could just get enough evidence to prove our men are prisoners aboard the boat, I am sure the Navy would shake it down. But so far I have found nothing that would warrant such action." Kent shook his head glumly.

"I think we're limiting the field. No Commie boat with prisoners in its hold would put in at Manila harbor. We're really shaking down those that arrive." Major Killian puffed deeply and blew a cloud of smoke into the air above Kent's head.

Kent drummed on the table with his fingers and frowned. "How efficient are the South Viet Nam naval forces?"

Major Killian smiled. "Reliable but not too well trained," he said. "The Navy is trying to help them. I'd say we better stretch things a little and let the instructors take over for this job with Vietnamese men going along for the ride."

Kent grinned. "Guess we better go into a huddle with our Navy brothers or the Marines."

"I'm in contact with them at all times," the Major said. "We better set up a definite plan of procedure, a sort of crash program."

"It should be done at once."

"We'll have some time if you spot the boat you suspect soon enough. Navy could have units in the area ready to take over," Major Killian said thoughtfully.

"I'd like to figure out a way to be in on the kill, but I guess I'll just have to play bird dog."

"I'll talk to you later tonight," the Major promised.

They parted, and Kent went to his quarters. He was restless and could not get interested in the book he was reading. He took a long walk on the base and even toyed with the idea of going into Manila. But he was afraid Major Killian would call him.

The Major did call after Kent returned from his walk. He didn't have very encouraging news.

"Navy wants to be sure we know what we're doing," he said. "They report that public relations in the South China Sea area aren't very good. A lot of backbiting, even among our friends."

"But if just one boat bypasses the Philippine Islands that should be enough for them," Kent said hotly.

"We'll see," Major Killian answered.

The next morning Major Killian had news for Kent. One boat, the Keena, a fishing boat with Philippine registration had passed the islands in the night and was headed for the

Asia mainland. The Philippine Coast Patrol reported the course and probable position. Kent hurried to the Clark Flight Operations room and checked out.

An hour later he was flying at an altitude of ten thousand feet, scanning the ocean below. He sighted the Keena and circled, dropping down to four thousand feet. He was sure the Voodoo was by now well known to the men aboard the boat. He circled and watched but there wasn't a thing about the fishing boat to cause suspicion. She plowed along on her course like any fishing boat. But Kent was convinced the Keena was the boat he had been looking for. The problem was how to convince the Navy. He finally banked over and headed back to Clark. A plan of action had formed in his mind. He was determined to take a stab at it if he could convince Major Killian.

14. COMMANDO TACTICS

Major Killian stared at Kent. "You want a speedboat and a couple of scuba divers from Air Rescue Service?"

"That's right," Kent said. "You have one, a sort of improved version of the old PT boat."

"But the idea is wild," Killian protested.

Kent looked at him grimly. "The situation is getting out of hand. That boat may reach the mainland and eight of our men will be tossed into filthy pens where they will be tortured and brainwashed and starved."

"But it's such a long shot." Major Killian wasn't convinced at all.

"Do I have to go to Jefferys?" Kent locked stares with the Major.

Killian shrugged his shoulders. Kent's scheme was one the Colonel was likely to approve. "You get your speedboat and frogmen," he said sourly. "The idea is to disable the Keena enough so she'll have to return to Manila for repairs, that right?"

"Not necessarily Manila. Her skipper probably knows coves or beaches where repairs could be made. But the

moment she puts in, she can be searched," Kent said and smiled.

"So you're set on having a try at it?"

"Just as soon as we can get outfitted. I'd like that to be within an hour," Kent said firmly.

Major Killian smiled. "It can be done. Are you by any chance a frogman?"

"I've made a hobby of skin diving," Kent answered. "I've been cooped up in a lot of out-of-the-way places where surf-boarding and skin diving were the only sports to be had."

"Be at Pier Nine in one hour." Killian got to his feet.

Kent grinned. "Thanks, Major." Kent got up and left the Major's office.

A half hour later Kent was in a huddle with two frogmen. They were divers working for a salvage company. Killian had picked them carefully. They were ready to tackle any job for five hundred dollars each. Big Joe Rowan was a brawny young man with a shock of close-cropped blond hair. He had a broken nose which made his face look twisted. Bart Knott was smaller, but he was muscular. His shoulders were broad and his face smooth and round like the face of a small boy. Kent had been very frank with them. He had warned them that the boat was probably armed, that its crew would shoot.

Big Joe grinned at him. "You open to suggestions?" he asked.

"I had thought of a magnetic bomb. The boat is wood, the propeller metal." Kent watched Big Joe.

"A bomb would alert them," Big Joe said. "The magnetic idea is good sense. It would hit the screw for sure. But I say we use heavy chain. The screw is wrecked, the chain likely to drop off and leave no clue. Screws go bad." Big Joe beamed.

Bart Knott grinned happily and said, "Like we done it to that smuggler that was heistin' salvage."

Big Joe nodded. "We've had a little experience along this line."

"But how could we manage heavy chain?" Kent asked.

"Use an air-filled float. The float is attached close to the chain and punctures and sinks on contact. The chain does the rest."

"Sounds good," Kent said doubtfully.

"You just leave it to Bart and me," Big Joe assured him.

The three crew members were Killian's men. They had been carefully briefed. The speedboat carried a 20-millimeter rapid-fire cannon, but it was not to be used except in an emergency. Big Joe and Bart happily worked on their deadly device while the crew got the speedboat ready to put out to sea. The departure was timed so that they would overtake the Keena after dark.

The speedboat shoved off at 2 P.M. that same day. Everyone aboard was keyed to a high pitch. Skipper Max Bell was very proud of his boat and knew how to get top speed out of her. They foamed along, prow lifted high, white water boiling up in wake that looked as though a hurricane had stirred it up. The ride was a wet and jarring one.

Kent discovered that the safest way to get along was to hang onto something solid.

Half an hour before sundown one of the crew spotted the Keena through powerful binoculars. The speedboat slowed and idled along matching the speed of the fishing boat. The Keena was not apt to sight her because the speedboat rode low in the water. Everyone was impatient. Big Joe and Bart got their gear in shape and laid out a suit, tank, and helmet for Kent.

"You done this before?" he asked Kent.

"A good many times. But this is the biggest fish I ever went after." Kent grinned at Big Joe.

"Have to carry a spear on your back. Just in case. Sharks." Big Joe placed an ugly-looking short spear with Kent's gear.

"Nasty-looking weapon," Kent said.

"Quite a sticker," Bart agreed.

As darkness settled the three men suited up. Big Joe looked down at the heavy chain with its float, magnet, and ropes for towing.

"Ought to leave enough of the screw and rudder so's they can limp back," he said.

Skipper Bell overtook the Keena. The boat was running with few lights. They were shielded so as not to be seen from above or the sides. All they did was to give the deck a little light. This suited the men on the speedboat. Bell moved well ahead of the fishing boat so as to allow the three frogmen to get set. They had to hit a moving target. Big Joe had a powerful underwater searchlight

which would have been a burden for a less powerful man.

The speedboat slowed and lay rising and falling. The crew stood ready while the frogmen closed helmets and adjusted oxygen tanks, fastened their spears in place. Big Joe gave a signal and the three went overboard. Then the chain device was lowered.

For a short distance Kent and his companions swam on the surface. The bulk of the Keena loomed against the night sky suddenly. It was headed directly toward them. Big Joe signaled for a dive, and they went down to the end of their tow ropes, working a little to the left of the Keena's course so that the prow of the boat would not smash the float. Big Joe turned on his searchlight and aimed it upward.

Kent saw the barnacled hull of the boat moving above them. It passed and they felt the agitation of its propeller. Then there was a hard tug on the float lines. They knew now the screw would wreck itself on the heavy chain.

Swiftly they turned away from the float lines, diving deep, stroking hard to get clear. The understanding was that they would not surface until some distance from the boat. The Keena might use a searchlight when her propeller went bad. Bell started a wide circle to pick them up.

After swimming underwater for some time they surfaced and opened their helmets. They rode deep in the water and looked back. No searchlight was sweeping the ocean, but a strong light was beamed downward at the stern of the boat which was wallowing and had clearly lost headway. Big Joe moved in close to Kent as they swam on.

"They're sending a man down for a look," he said. "We ought to have time to get picked up and be off before they get around to looking for us."

They swam on and finally Big Joe flashed a few cautious signals. They were answered without the speedboat flashing a light. Bell moved in and again Big Joe gave a couple of cautious winks of light. In minutes the speedboat was beside them and they were getting a hand up to the deck. Before they had settled down to get out of their gear the speedboat was slipping away, not in a noisy roar but at a smooth pace.

Bell turned the wheel over to a member of the crew and came back to where the frogmen were dressing.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

"As planned," Kent answered. "They lost headway right off. Bobbing around with a man going down to see what happened." He grinned at Bell in the darkness. The speedboat would remain blacked out until they were well away from the Keena.

"Quite a caper," Bell said admiringly.

"Hope they have enough left to get back to the islands," Kent said.

"She might pick up a tow and go on," Bell suggested.

"If anybody gave her a lift it would be back to Manila," Big Joe said.

"They'll rig something and come in," Bart said. "We both know Gunner Shultz, her skipper. Lone wolf, but that boat's all in the world he owns."

Bell went forward and stepped up the speed of his boat.

He didn't push it, however, as he had done coming out. There was no big rush. They now had light and one of the crew served coffee.

They docked before eleven o'clock. Kent thanked the crew and the frogmen.

Big Joe said, "Easiest five hundred clams I ever earned."

"You earned it," Kent said.

"I got to see my gal. Been a long time since we had five hundred to spend." Bart's little-boy face beamed.

"It'll take that Cleo about two nights to get all of it." Big Joe laughed. "Me, I'm salting mine away."

Kent laughed and left them arguing. He got a cab to the Base. Why wait for a Base free taxi when there was news to report? He called Major Killian and briefed him, then he called Jefferys.

The Colonel listened to the report, then said, "Good work, Barstow. If that boat needs help to get in, I suggest that you arrange it. Have a boat happen along headed for Manila."

"Good idea. Better have the passerby headed for an isolated landing platform on one of the islands," Kent said enthusiastically.

"Excellent." Jefferys was in the best mood he had shown since Kent had started on his mission.

"I'll get right on it," Kent said.

"Keep me informed."

"I will, sir." It was the way they always ended a phone conversation.

As soon as the Colonel hung up, Kent called Killian

back and explained what Jefferys had suggested. The Major thought the idea a good one. It would cost some money, but there would be no hitch there because the idea had originated with Jefferys.

"I'll get right on it. Another night's sleep shot." Killian was gruff but Kent knew he would get on the job at once. He was suddenly sleepy. With a yawn, he got ready for bed.

15. A CRIPPLED SHIP

A tramp freighter bearing the legend, King's Castle, Hong Kong, steamed into the night loaded with thirty sacks of cocoanut husks. Her skipper had been carefully instructed and had received an advance payment which was as big as a single cargo haul would have earned him. When it came to rescuing its men, the U.S. Air Force did not count pennies. Major Killian left the dock and drove to BOQ. He was dead-tired but he set his alarm clock for five A.M.

Kent awakened at 0600 hours. He was filled with a desire to roll over and go back to sleep. There would be no reports so early in the morning. Then he got an idea. Why not fly out and see if the Keena had managed to get underway? He was suddenly wide-awake. He got out of bed and dressed.

After snatching a quick breakfast at the field mess he called Operations and had a crew sent to check the Voodoo and have her ready for flight.

One hour later Kent was knifing along on a course which would take him past the spot where he and the frogmen had left the Keena. He quickly spotted the boat. It was drifting eastward before a light wind. Kent did not circle

but kept on in a straight course as though on his way toward Saigon. He was at twenty-five thousand feet and felt very sure the sailors on the boat would not suspect he was checking on the Keena. When he was well out of sight of the boat, he circled and headed back toward Clark Air Base.

He called in and left word to be relayed to the King's Castle that the Keena was drifting. He gave a fix on the boat. Twenty minutes later he cleared for landing and set the Voodoo down.

Kent went at once to Major Killian's office to wait for a report. He called Jefferys and reported on progress. Jefferys was calmly hopeful. Killian came in and sat down at his desk. He had been busy arranging details.

The inspection of the Keena would be a job for the Philippine authorities; but he and Kent, along with his men, would go to the dock where the boat was to be taken. The dock was one that had once been used by a sugar plantation until a road had been built through the jungle. It was still occasionally used for unloading supplies.

"As soon as we're sure of the pickup and plans, we'll drive up the coast," the Major said.

"We'll hope it works out according to plan," Kent answered.

Hours dragged past. A C-47 coming in from Saigon reported sighting both the Keena and the King's Castle. The freighter was answering distress signals from the fishing boat. Later the King's Castle called in, reporting that she was taking the fishing boat in tow and expected to drop her at the plantation dock by five o'clock.

"Seventeen hundred hours," Kent said with satisfaction.

There was a bustle of action, though the two jeeps would not have to hurry. The plantation road passed close to the dock and there was a side road leading to it. Kent was giving the plans careful thought as he sat sipping hot coffee out of a paper cup. He swallowed the last of the coffee and crumpled the cup, tossing it into a waste basket. He looked over at Killian.

"I believe I'll go along with the Philippine cutter," he said.

"Might be a good idea. I'll speak to its skipper." Killian called Philippine Customs and talked briefly to its chief. The chief was willing to have Kent go along with his crew. He assured Killian that his men would be armed and ready for anything that might happen. He had included military personnel. Killian thanked him.

Kent was at the customs dock a half hour before the cutter was due to leave. But he had to wait an hour. There was a half-hour delay due to a mixup in orders. Kent didn't like it but there was nothing he could do about it. The cutter finally got underway. Captain Pablo, a dark Filipino, was apologetic. He spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

"The red tape," he said.

"I understand." Kent smiled.

The cutter moved quickly, staying close to the coast. They passed a small boat powered by an outboard motor. It had "Keena" stenciled on its prow. After a while they

passed the King's Castle heading toward Manila. She answered their hail but did not stop.

Presently they sighted the Keena tied up at a rickety dock. As they closed in they saw men working at her stern. They had found a raft and were on it. Gunner Shultz was leaning over the rail. As they pulled in, he waved a hand and shouted.

"Ahoy, Captain Pablo!"

Pablo returned the greeting smilingly. "Ahoy, Captain Shultz."

The cutter moved in and was made fast. Her crew jumped to the dock and moved to the Keena's gangplank. Captain Pablo was ahead of his men.

Gunner Shultz met the captain with an extended hand. "Welcome aboard," he said heartily.

"Just routine," Pablo explained.

Gunner Shultz laughed a booming laugh. "Checking out this tub is an easy way to earn your pay," he said and waved toward an open hatch.

Kent had a sinking feeling. But he followed Pablo below. There wasn't a soul in the hold. There were some crates but they were all too small to hold a man. Pablo looked into the engine room. Kent was prowling around checking the dirty planking. Pablo came out of the engine room.

"Lots of power," he remarked, then gave Kent a twisted smile. "Looks like a false alarm." His smile faded. "I've picked up rumors about this ship's trouble," he said.

"Yes?" Kent's face was a mask.

"Couple of divers named Big Joe Rowan and Bart Knott are spending a lot of cash in Manila."

"You have suspicions?" Kent asked.

"Yes."

"We'll talk about it later," Kent said. He didn't want to get into an argument with the Captain at the moment. He was puzzled and upset. He wanted to check further. He climbed to the deck and left the Keena.

Kent started up the road leading away from the dock. Frequent showers kept the jungle lush. It crowded in, threatening to obliterate the road. Kent kept his eyes on the road looking for tracks. But it was hard and showed no boot marks. He finally came to a trail leading away from the road. It was a footpath which had been hacked through the tangled growth. The earth on the path was soft. Mingled with many prints of bare feet were others made by boots. One look told Kent that most of the tracks were made by Air Force boots. He lifted his service revolver out of its holster and started up the trail. After going a short distance he had to push branches and vines aside to pass.

He had gone perhaps a hundred yards when he came to a small clearing. Pausing, he peered into it. This was typical guerrilla terrain, the sort of place where a man could be ambushed. He started skirting the clearing, showing his way through the tangled growth.

Suddenly he felt something hard shoved into his back and a gruff voice said, "Step into the open."

Kent knew the feel of a gun muzzle. He stepped into the clearing.

"Drop your gun," the voice behind him ordered. "Raise your hands."

Kent dropped his revolver and raised his hands. A squat slant-eyed man stepped up beside him. He was armed with a machine gun and he was grinning, showing buck teeth that were an ugly yellow.

"We add one more," he said and raised his voice. "Get them out here."

In a few minutes Spud and his men appeared. Their hands were tied behind them. They were dirty and haggard but Spud grinned. "Welcome to the party," he said.

"Shut your mouth," the buck-toothed man said. He moved close to Kent and started frisking him. Two other men armed with machine guns stood watching, their guns held loosely. Their leader stepped away from Kent. He nodded to one of his men. "Tie his hands behind his back."

One of the men pulled a length of cord from his pocket and advanced toward Kent. Kent knew this was no time to start anything.

"We have orders to shoot you all if an attempt is made to escape," the buck-toothed man said in a conversational voice.

Kent stood with his hand dangling. He suddenly grinned. The man approaching him stared at him and frowned. He stopped dead in his tracks when a voice from the edge of the jungle rang out.

"Drop your guns."

The three men jerked around clutching their guns. They were faced by eight men armed with service revolvers. Major Killian and his crew had arrived. Two of the men dropped their machine guns, but the buck-toothed man started to jerk his against his hip. Killian's revolver barked and the squat man jerked backward as though struck a hard blow. The muzzle of his machine gun raised and he fired one burst before he plunged forward on his face.

"Nice shooting," Kent said into the stillness which followed the burst.

The silence was shattered by a whoop from Spud Murphy. "Yippie!" he shouted. "Get these ropes off my wrists."

Killian's men moved in and cut the ropes from skinned wrists. The eight airmen chafed their wrists and flexed their arms. Spud, Michaels, Green, and Kent crowded around Major Killian.

"I was beginning to worry," Kent said.

"It was a ticklish situation," Killian said. "One burst from a machine gun could have cut down the lot of us."

"The possibility entered my mind," Kent said. "We better tie the two live ones." He bent over the leader and turned him on his back. "This one we won't have to tie, but we'll pack him down to Pablo's cutter." He stood up and glanced at the machine guns. "Pablo might have some use for them. We'll take them along."

Pablo stood open-mouthed as he watched the men approach the dock. At his side Gunner Shultz stood glaring,

his face twisted with rage. He edged away from Pablo. Pablo turned on him.

"Stay where you are," he snapped and spoke to one of his men. "Search him and then handcuff him." He moved away to meet the approaching Air Force men. He had a big grin for Kent. "You have gone to considerable trouble to satisfy my curiosity."

"I'll fill you in later." Kent looked down at the men on the raft. They were standing rigid, staring upward. "Need a hand?"

Pablo shook his head and glanced at Gunner Shultz, who stood staring down at the body of the buck-toothed man. He spoke to his second in command.

"Bring them up and put them in irons. Detail two men to remain aboard the boat."

"I'll ride back with the boys," Kent said. "See you later."

Pablo saluted smartly as the Air Force group moved away.

On arrival at Clark, Kent left the care of the rescued men to Major Killian and reported to Jefferys at once. He covered the main points briefly, leaving the detail for his written report. Jefferys listened and his comment was short.

"The matter is wrapped up for the moment, but . . ."

Kent grinned and waited. The Colonel had sniffed out new trouble. In this undercover business there was no end, just a change of scene and of unknown enemies.